

Pakistan-US Relations: examining sustainable bilateral cooperation via civil society collaboration

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Abstract:

Pakistan and the United States (US) have struggled to form mutually beneficial foreign policies that withstand volatile political phases. In the current global context, there is an urgent need for innovative and practical approaches to enrich the field of international relations, allowing policymakers to overcome diplomatic deadlocks. This research examines the potential role of a sustainable development approach with civil society organisations (CSOs) as the implementing instrument of foreign policies. Through case studies of successful CSO initiatives across economic, social, and environmental pillars, specifically covering SDGs 3, 8, 13 and 17, the study observes and empirically examines the multisectoral operations of US-based civil society in Pakistan, highlighting its comprehensive impact on the people as well as uncovering the resilient nature of civil society-led cooperation between states. The research finds that integrating civil society into foreign policy can create resilient and sustainable development-oriented bilateral relations, offering a practical strategy for enhancing collaboration and achieving sustainability. This model presents a pathway for countries to transcend transactional ties and establish lasting, mutually beneficial partnerships. The study also opens doors for further research in IR to welcome the sustainable development paradigm in bilateral studies.

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1. Introduction

In a rapidly changing, hyperconnected world, which is increasingly focused on meeting the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), the nature and instruments of bilateral engagement also need scholarly attention and revisitation. The UN's Agenda 2030, particularly SDG 17, requires international cooperation by revitalising “global partnerships” to achieve its goals (United Nations, 2016, p. 22). This necessity opens opportunities for diplomatic interactions that are meaningful, practical, and sustainability driven. Given this context, there is room to expand the field of International Relations (IR) to accommodate such diplomatic interactions and to study effective foreign policy instruments that can realise these goals. This study suggests that civil society can be a potent instrument for meeting SDGs and enhancing relationships between states. *Sustainable* diplomatic interactions and cooperation can provide purpose and mutually beneficial goals to countries struggling to find a vision for their foreign policies toward each other.

To illustrate this, the research examines the diplomatic interactions between Pakistan and the United States, demonstrating that civil society can be an effective and resilient instrument for interactions between states, even if their overall relationship has been struggling. The study focuses on the cooperation between Pakistan and the US exclusively through Civil Society Organisations (CSOs) across the three pillars of sustainable development: society, economy, and environment. This research carries out an empirical examination of the collaborative civil society action on a bilateral stage and its implications for sustainable development goals. It also contributes to the advancement of IR theory by taking the Sustainable Development paradigm further and providing its practical implementation scenarios. Not only does it show how such a collaboration can occur on a bilateral level, i.e., by taking the case of Pakistan-US relations, but it also highlights the capacity of international relations to become more civil society and development-oriented for a sustainable future.

2. Literature review

The nature of Pakistan and the US's relationship has been proven by history to be more transactional in nature. Furthermore, turbulent dynamics between Pakistan and the United States have unfolded since Operation Neptune Spere in 2011, and Pakistan's economic conditions have cast a grim shadow over potential cooperation (Afzal, 2023). Following the US's withdrawal from Afghanistan in August 2021, Pakistan's significance and relationship with the US have diminished. Successive Pakistani governments have sought to address this diplomatic crisis by advocating for a comprehensive policy and relationship with the US, encompassing trade, investment, and social collaborations (Afzal, 2023). Conversely, the United States has expressed a desire to maintain Pakistan within its sphere of influence, continuing formal diplomatic ties and high-profile visits (Afzal, 2023). However, neither nation has succeeded in revitalising its relationship on amicable and sustainable grounds, highlighting

the need for re-evaluating its foreign policies and utilising effective instruments to achieve its goals.

The United States' foreign policy revolves around promoting its values, economy, and security worldwide, and Pakistan's interests align with these goals (Lowi et al., 2009). Yet, the lack of substantial progress necessitates the application of non-traditional approaches and instruments to improve relations (Sfeir-Younis, 2004). To forge a collaborative solution, Pakistan and the US must first define their goals and prioritise shared motivations beyond strategic interests as Haqqani (2022) states that even transactional relations can be viable if based on shared interests. This research proposes that the concept of sustainable development can provide this common motivation and goal. The term 'sustainable cooperation' used in this research not only characterises the longevity of the relationship but is rooted in the concept of sustainable development. Furthermore, the COVID-19 pandemic and the looming threat of climate change have underscored the importance of global cooperation, making sustainable cooperation between states more crucial than ever. Pakistan and the US can seize this momentum to refocus their foreign policy goals on fostering sustainable ties. However, traditional modes and instruments of Pak-US relationship have failed to resuscitate Pak-US trust and friendliness. Therefore, this study suggests that civil society can serve as an effective medium of communication and an instrument for action, paving the way toward sustainable bilateral relations. Hence, harnessing the strengths of civil society in Pakistan and the US can provide a promising avenue to overcome the current impasse and build a sustainable, multilateral relationship.

After humanity's actions during the Anthropocene were introduced to the world officially by the United Nations, the idea of sustainable development emerged as the standard for modern development and salvation for mankind. In 1987, a UN report entitled 'Our Common Future', also known as the Brundtland Report, brought forward the idea of sustainable development; "development that meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs" (United Nations, 1987, p. 36). The concept of sustainable development not only gives shared motivation for countries to collaborate but also promises mutually beneficial relationships. The current world paradigm is centred around sustainable development that urges countries to reconcile their economic development and security agendas with social and environmental factors and demands. It is considered the way forward for humanity toward a prosperous shared future (Carius et al., 2018).

3. Conceptual and theoretical framework: sustainable development paradigm in IR

In the past, IR has been going through a natural transformation inspired by the realities of the world as well as the emerging movements. The current global context demands that IR theorists pivot from classical or traditional paradigms that fail to explain the multidimensional nature of inter-state relations and cooperation today. Some scholars even deem it an intellectual crisis (Morán-Blanco, 2022). The answer lies in a *sustainable* approach that focuses on

comprehensive development instead of targeted security advancements or economic gains at the cost of society and the environment. Countries that have failed to find their way toward reconciliation and deeper bilateral relations can find a shared goal and detailed motivations in the sustainable approach to fix their ties. Pakistan and the United States, which see a deterioration of their relationship due to regional and security issues or lack thereof, can find a solution in sustainable relationship building. This research takes this emerging concept further and applies it to the relationship between the two states, the US and Pakistan, by suggesting its incorporation in the foreign policy of the states while also studying a reliable instrument for effective implementation, i.e., civil society.

Morán-Blanco (2022) proposes a new paradigm for the field of IR that centres on sustainable development and cooperation principles. Morán-Blanco (2022) views that International Relations studies were not entirely unfamiliar with the idea of sustainable development before or after the Brundtland Report. The concepts of sustainable development, although in part, were already reflected in globalist, trans nationalist and structuralist theories of IR. Although sustainable development is a relatively new concept, nearly all paradigms and theories of International Relations align with one or more aspects of the UN Agenda 2030 for Sustainable Development Goals (Morán-Blanco, 2022).

Considering the sustainability concept described above, a sustainable relationship between two states would mean one that is enduring and multidimensional: a mutually beneficial relationship in terms of security, economy, society, and environment. In the case of Pakistan and the United States, it is meant to provide the two countries with a common and lasting goal to strive towards, steering away from the transactional relationship that has hitherto remained reflective in the foreign policy and behaviour of the two states toward each other. As mentioned earlier, the concept of sustainable relationship has been derived from sustainable development; taking this further, this relationship is widely seen to constitute three main dimensions: economic, social and environmental. A foreign policy that is guided by the sustainable development principles would also constitute these aspects together without sacrificing one or the other.

Barral (2012) views sustainable development as the core concept that has penetrated all fields of life, from economics to foreign affairs. As per Barral (2012), “Sustainable development has become an unavoidable paradigm that should, as commonly accepted, underpin most, if not all, human action(s)”. This also includes global level partnerships and relations between states. In the post-Cold War world, the world shifted toward a development paradigm that slowly evolved into “Sustainable Development”. Many states today shape their foreign policy considering the SDGs, which, upon implementation, boosts their bilateral ties with states worldwide. For example, just in 2017, the Australian government issued a Foreign Policy White Paper to guide the country’s path in a rapidly evolving globalised world (Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade, 2017). The paper explicitly stated the promotion of Sustainable Development as one of the goals of Australian foreign policy. Likewise, various states, with

the European Union (EU) as a notable example, explicitly prioritise addressing sustainable development requirements in their foreign policies. The trade agreements established by the EU underscore this commitment, considering not only environmental or green considerations but also emphasising social and economic aspects of sustainability (EU, 2023).

It is crucial to recognise that the sustainable development paradigm has come far ahead from being an ideal theory or approach; it has evolved into a concrete system consisting of concepts, approaches, practical institutions, and legal commitments. For instance, the UN Agenda 2030 is at the core of all UN institutions and projects around the world. But more importantly, the concept has also penetrated international law and holds much legal weight. A study conducted in 2012 found that, specifically, mentions of sustainable development were evident in 112 multilateral treaties, approximately 30 of which aimed to achieve universal participation (Barral, 2012). Additionally, achieving sustainable development is kept as a goal in hundreds of international conventions and treaties; most of which are binding since the goals are part of the operative part of treaties, not just the preamble (Barral, 2012). This highlights the significance of having a foreign policy that is informed and motivated by sustainable development principles.

Foreign policy and state relations that are guided by sustainability principles go beyond the traditional boundaries of diplomatic relations between states. Sustainable diplomacy recognises that diplomatic efforts can and should be applied to various global relationships beyond formal interstate connections. This includes engaging with non-state actors and addressing issues that go beyond traditional state-centric concerns. It can even mean realigning national interests to meet the goals of intergenerational and intragenerational equity in terms of environment, economy and social development (Barral, 2012; Constantinou & Der Derian, 2010). It is meant to contribute positively to global security because sustained diplomatic efforts, characterised by cooperation, mutual interest creation, and conflict resolution, are believed to enhance global security (Nye, 2009). This assumption is supported by case studies and specific diplomatic initiatives that highlight the effectiveness of a long-term, inclusive, and reflexive approach to diplomacy (Nye, 2009; Constantinou & Der Derian, 2010).

Currently, the foreign policies of Pakistan and the United States toward each other do not reflect the needs of time, nor do they promise a future of deeper cooperation and mutual benefit. However, sustainable diplomacy would provide the necessary direction, and approach, along with practical instruments to meet the goal of having a sustainable relationship.

4. Civil Society as a major foreign policy instrument

Sustainable development is not a static concept; rather, it evolves with time according to the circumstances (Barral, 2023). In the globalised world of today, another emerging trend is that with the advent of the fifth industrial revolution, particularly with the introduction of Web 3.0 (Garrett, 2023), the information and power structures of the world will shift to become more

decentralised, requiring a harmonious relationship between people and machines. As futuristic as it may sound, this is the reality of today and how the world is progressing. In such a world, building sustainable foreign relations requires empowerment and education of people. It also requires a more robust civil society to ensure that the future does not become exploitative, and that the fifth industrial revolution is guided by laws that protect human interests across the globe, including how countries treat each other despite technological access differences. Civil Society Organisations or CSOs have been a huge part of global history, not just on a national level but also increasingly on a global scale. Civil Society stands as a strong pillar in public life in the United States as well as Pakistan (Qadeer, 1997; Villa, 2006). The UN also recognises civil society as the third sector of any society apart from the public and private sectors. Furthermore, it has also increasingly taken up the role of being an intermediary between the government and the people. However, most importantly, for the scope of this research, the civil society is to be used as an instrument for foreign policy implementation.

As the world has become irreversibly globalised, the decisions made on an international or bilateral level should also be made democratic (Patriota, 2023). Extending civil society's role on these levels would make the process more democratic and the relationships between countries more reflective of the will of people and more sustainable in terms of their development. This is also reflected in one of the main characteristics of the sustainable development concept that promotes the idea of 'leaving no one behind', which has also been picked up by international civil society and promoted to advance development (Bhusan et al., 2018).

Furthermore, civil society is also involved in the making of foreign policy in the form of think tanks or platforms that reflect public opinion (Sfieri-Younis, 2004; Hochstetler, 2023). For example, most of the foreign policy decisions in the European Union are often taken after holding referendums to gauge public opinion, which inevitably includes the influence and involvement of CSOs, such as labour unions, farmer unions etc. Civil society also has the capacity to be a useful tool in the execution of foreign policies, whether it is the exertion of soft power or the execution of joint public projects. For example, the role of USAID and its collaboration with CSOs in Pakistan to meet foreign policy goals of the United States shows how civil society can be a potent instrument.

CSOs are also an important part of the UN Agenda 2030, and its implementation. In fact, SDG 17 specifically addresses the role of important partnerships in meeting sustainable development goals. The 17.17 target of SDGs stands to "encourage and promote effective public, public-private, and civil society partnerships, building on the experience and resourcing strategies of partnerships" (United Nations, 2016, p. 24). This aligns closely with the focus of this research, which examines the efficacy and potential of civil society partnerships and public-civil society partnerships in the formulation and execution of foreign policy between Pakistan and the United States. Furthermore, target 17.14 stresses "enhance policy coherence for sustainable development" (United Nations, 2016, p. 24); in this research, it can be interpreted as the

coherence in the foreign policies of the two states for improved bilateral relations and assisted collaboration between civil societies.

Target 17.16 is to “enhance the global partnership for sustainable development, complemented by multi-stakeholder partnerships that mobilise and share knowledge, expertise, technologies and financial resources to support the achievement of sustainable development goals in all countries, particularly developing countries” (United Nations, 2016). In addition to these targets, the 17th SDG also talks about collaboration in terms of the transfer of knowledge and technology between the developed and the developing world. Looking from the lens of international relations, it becomes impossible to attain these objectives, without a “deliberate and coherent foreign policy” to guide action (Carius et al., 2018). Therefore, it is only logical to extend the partnerships between states through the joint function and collaboration between CSOs. CSOs have been proven to “create a tremendous competitive advantage to act and create political and institutional spaces at the local level” (Sfeir-Younis, 2004, p. 30) and global level (Sénit, 2019).

5. Research methodology

To carry out a detailed analysis of the relationship between civil society action and their achievement of sustainable development and bilateral cooperation goals, the research employs a qualitative analytical approach. It relies on primary data to chart out figures; the data was taken from official sources of the US government and analysed as well as charted. It also uses the document analysis method to gather data and information about the actions of CSO from their official websites, reports, and published documents. The research also relied on extensive secondary literature, such as books and journal articles, for theoretical consideration and to support the arguments of the study. The study limits its scope to the working of US-originating civil society organisations registered and operating in Pakistan across sustainable development domains.

6. Demonstration of civil society as a catalyst in sustainable cooperation between Pakistan and the US: a multisectoral collaboration

The three undisputed pillars of sustainable development are economy, society, and environment. To attain sustainable development, mankind must simultaneously work to protect its material, social, and ecological capital (Ana Maria, 2015; Mensah, 2019). This requires concerted and deliberate effort in policy and action to ensure social welfare, economic growth, and ecological protection.

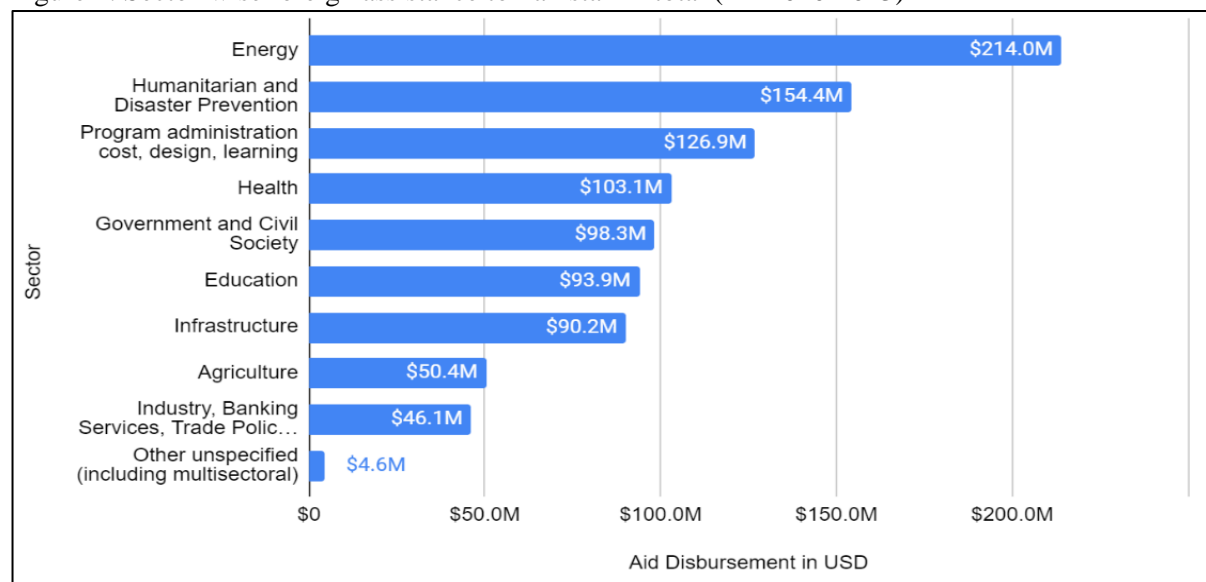
According to Ana Maria (2015), the three Pillars can have multiple interpretations, depending on the field of study. However, the three are always interrelated and interdependent, bringing meaning to what sustainability means for that field. For instance, in biology, it would be to protect biodiversity, or in sociology, it would mean the appropriate use of resources and the

development of human capital (Ana Maria, 2015). For this research, which is in the field of international relations, the three pillars of sustainable development can be best approached from the definition given by Constantinou and Der Derian (2010):

“Sustainable diplomacy is used to refer to mediatory action that displays sensitivity...and promotes the cooperative spirit and prolongs the duration of the diplomatic encounter, including sustained effort, and experimentation in the creation of mutual interests and resolution of bilateral and global problems”.

Considering the above definition and the three pillars of sustainable development, it becomes clear that building sustainable diplomatic ties requires multilateral and multisectoral collaboration. Pakistan and the United States are not strangers to this concept, as the countries have continued to collaborate on a multisectoral level. United States assistance to Pakistan has also spanned multiple sectors in recent years (see figure 1).

Figure 1: Sector-wise foreign assistance to Pakistan in total (FY 2020-2023)

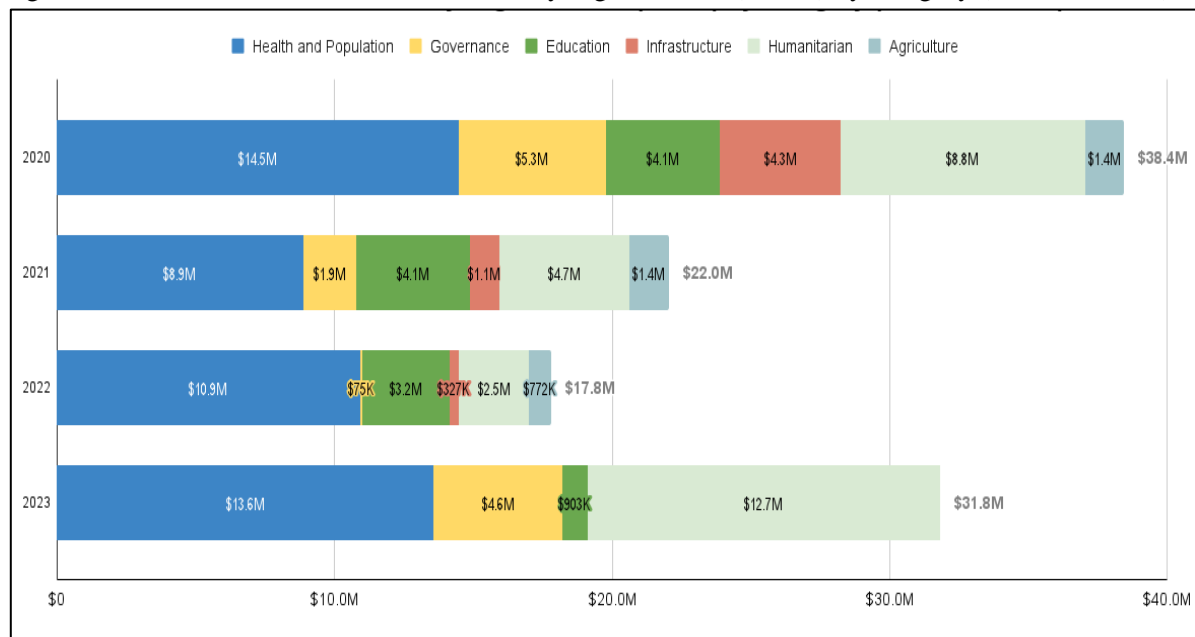


Note: The data is taken from ForeignAssistance.gov, it shows the total aid disbursement from multiple funding sources and implementation partners including governments, enterprises and CSOs. (Charted by Author)

As evident from the data given in the Figure 1, Pakistan has received assistance from the US in multiple sectors; where energy sector received the most excellent aid of 214 million dollars between the years 2020 and 2023, followed by the humanitarian aid, health sector assistance, government and civil society, education, infrastructure and even banking and business industry. Engagement with multiple partners, including the two countries' governments, private enterprises and CSOs, made this possible. Therefore, it is important to establish that the bilateral ties strengthen when the two countries' cooperation is multisectoral, making it sustainable and lasting. This research highlights this factor with a special emphasis on the employment of civil society to implement these collaborative projects on a deeper and mutually beneficial level.

Coming back to the three main pillars of sustainable development, a sustainable relationship between two states would also encompass collaboration in these three sectors. Achieving this multidimensional cooperation effectively would demand civil society collaboration between the two states. This would include non-governmental organisations and other CSOs working openly together. Collaboration between CSOs cannot only bring economic prosperity, environmental awareness, and social development within a state but also be the primary connection between people of two countries.

Figure 2: USAID disbursement via civil society organisations (NGOs) by category (FY 2020-2023)



Note: In US Dollars (FY2020-FY2023 - partial data from 2023) extracted and charted from the US government's official site for foreign assistance data (ForeignAssistance.gov). This portion of assistance is solely implemented by civil society partners, including United States' NGOs, International NGOs, and Local NGOs (Charted by Author).

The United States has been employing both US and Pakistan origin civil society to implement its diplomatic and developmental goals regarding Pakistan (Saleh, 2012). Figure 2 highlights that CSOs themselves work with USAID as implementing partners in various sectors that fall within the three pillars of sustainable development. Later in this research, a detailed analysis of collaboration in each of sustainability pillars is studied in the light of examples with their impact. Figure 2 shows an overall view of how civil society successfully continues to operate in sectors of health and population, governance, humanitarian aid, education, infrastructure and agriculture. It evidences civil society's ability to allow socioeconomic development through collaboration between countries; the outcome of such endeavours can be interpreted in a diplomatic light. There is a clear potential for sustainable collaboration between Pakistan and the United which, if harnessed properly, can have an enduring and positive impact on the people of the two countries.

For the scope of this research, it is necessary to highlight examples from each sector – society,

economy, and environment – further to demonstrate how the CSOs of two states can collaborate to build better relations and have a lasting impact on the people. Furthermore, the United States heavily employs USAID and non-governmental organisations in Pakistan to execute its foreign policy goals, especially when it comes to developmental projects. This research suggests that a deliberate and expanded use of civil society by both states can help the two states build a *sustainable* relationship. However, such fruitful collaboration would require widespread recognition and definitive policy guidance and protection by the governments.

In the following section, examples of collaborative projects are taken specifically from US-originated CSOs operating in Pakistan in the society, economy, and environment sectors. This is done to empirically study civil society's role in sustainable cooperation within the real-world context.

6.1. Pak-US civil society collaboration in the economic pillar

Economic sustainability involves a production system that meets current consumption needs without jeopardising future requirements. Traditionally, economists assumed infinite natural resources and emphasised market efficiency. However, recognising the finite nature of resources prompts a re-evaluation of unchecked growth. Economic sustainability requires equitable and fiscally sound decision-making, considering other sustainability aspects beyond economic considerations (, 2019). For developing countries like Pakistan, the question is not simply about overexploitation but of under-development in various economic areas. To build sustainable ties between Pakistan and the United States, a multifaceted collaboration in the economic sector would create an atmosphere of mutual benefit.

In international relations, this would mean mutually beneficial trade agreements that do not exploit resources but rather enhance human capital. It can also be seen in investment policies, where one country invests in the potential of another country. However, it must be remembered that economic growth should not come at the price of social exploitation or environmental degradation.

The theme of economic collaboration is expansive, involving various SDG targets to achieve sustainability. This section particularly focuses on selected SDG targets, emphasising SDG 8, which aims to “Promote sustained, inclusive, and sustainable economic growth, full and productive employment, and decent work for all” (United Nations, 2016). Numerous CSOs in Pakistan exemplify how they contribute to creating economic opportunities independently and in collaboration with local entities. The work of these organisations aligns closely with SDG targets, highlighting the vital role that civil society can play in the development of Pakistan. For instance, Target 8.3 states to “promote development-oriented policies that support productive activities, decent job creation, entrepreneurship, creativity and innovation, and encourage the formalisation and growth of micro-, small- and medium-sized enterprises, including through access to financial services” (United Nations, 2016).

6.1.1. Successful cases of economic development through CSO action

CARE International is a non-governmental organisation of US origin that works internationally, including in Pakistan. In 2021, it launched its " Ignite " program, a small business facilitation program focusing on women entrepreneurs. In Pakistan, only 1% of women currently participate in entrepreneurial activity compared to 21% of men (CARE, 2023). It works by facilitating access to credit and capacity building. Ignite by CARE International continues toward its goals. By 2022, Ignite had already facilitated 2 million Pakistani entrepreneurs, with 45,000 deeply supported entrepreneurs, of whom more than thirty per cent were women (CARE, 2023).

Ignite also presents a perfect example of civil society collaboration with government entities. It received informal support from the Pakistan government with the then Special Assistant to Prime Minister, Dr. Sania Nishtar, presiding over the launching ceremony (Mastercard, 2021). The program also demonstrates multi-stakeholder collaboration as it received corporate support from the US, with Mastercard committing \$250 million to support small businesses, including the Ignite program by CARE International in Pakistan (Mastercard, 2021). This program is a perfect example of CSOs working in Pakistan to uplift the economy by facilitating access to decent employment while improving women entrepreneurs' access to banking facilities. It falls in the scope of SDG 8 and its sub-target 8.3, as mentioned above.

Acumen Pakistan, another US-originated nonprofit organisation, also offers entrepreneurial investment and leadership training in Pakistan. It provides business incubation and acceleration programs for aspiring Pakistani entrepreneurs (Acumen Pakistan, 2017). These programs provide funding, mentorship, and network access, enabling new ventures to flourish and create jobs. It has helped many people make a positive ripple effect in their communities. Acumen Pakistan claims to have invested 15 million dollars in Pakistan since 2002, facilitating 16 companies and impacting 4 million lives over these years through job creation and household support (Acumen Pakistan, 2017).

In addition to the above-given examples, multiple other CSOs working in Pakistan are helping the country achieve economic prosperity through capacity building. These programs also help alleviate poverty in Pakistan.

6.2. Pak-US civil society collaboration in social pillar

Social sustainability encompasses equity, empowerment, accessibility, participation, and cultural identity (Mensah, 2019). It implies a social organisation system that alleviates poverty and uplifts the population without causing environmental destruction or economic instability. Achieving social sustainability involves fostering people's development, communities, and cultures, ensuring access to healthcare, education, gender equality, peace, and stability (Mensah, 2019). Unlike economic and environmental systems, the dynamics within the social

system are intangible but critical for a meaningful life. Bilateral relations between the two states would mean collaboration in projects that promote social welfare through education, cultural exchange, technology transfer, gender equality, eradication of poverty, etc.

6.2.1. Successful cases of social development through CSO action

This research will select successful cases from the health and education sectors that follow specific targets from the SDG official targets and indicators to demonstrate the potential for collaboration and the role of CSOs in uplifting people. This section will highlight three notable cases: the PAIMAN project, Save the Children organisation, and World Learning.

The first case worthy of attention and acknowledgement is The Pakistan Initiative for Mothers and Newborns (PAIMAN), which was executed through multiple NGO involvement and received funding from USAID. The project lasted six years and saved the lives of 30,000 babies, reducing the neonatal mortality rate by 23 per cent in Pakistan (Jparadis, 2010). The project included multiple stakeholders who collaborated with local branches of their NGOs and other local associations, such as the Pakistan Voluntary Health Nutrition Association (PAVHNA), Population Council and Save the Children US. The project received 92 million dollars in funding and impacted the lives of 34 million Pakistanis (JSI Research & Training Institute, 2010). When studied in the light of SDGs, the project provides a perfect case study for meeting SDG 3, which aims to “Ensure healthy lives and promote well-being for all at all ages” (United Nations, 2016, p. 4). Specifically, it falls under Target 3.2, which states, “By 2030, end preventable deaths of newborns and children under five years of age, with all countries aiming to reduce neonatal mortality to at least as low as 12 per 1,000 live births and under-5 mortality to at least as low as 25 per 1,000 live births” (United Nations, 2016).

Another example that demonstrates the effectiveness of civil society operations and their ability to impact lives through social welfare is presented by Save The Children International, a US non-profit that has been working in Pakistan since 1979 (Save the Children, 2023). It works in areas of Health and Nutrition, Education, Child Protection, Livelihoods, and Humanitarian response programs. In 2022, Pakistan faced floods of Biblical proportions, leading to trillions in economic loss and millions of people affected. Pakistan already faces a critical food insecurity issue, with 5.96 million people facing emergency-level food insecurity before the floods (Reliefweb, 2022). The floods exacerbated the crisis, leading to 8.62 million people being under extreme food insecurity (Reliefweb, 2022). In such dire circumstances, Save the Children facilitated more than 321,478 people, including more than 158,308 children, and spent 16.8 million dollars in response and recovery efforts after the floods (Save the Children, 2023). One of the major funding sources for Save the Children Pakistan in its flood relief efforts was USAID, another example of how the United States employs CSOs to implement its foreign policy decisions.

In addition to the health and development sector, CSOs are also active in Pakistan in providing

quality education to children in underserved areas; for instance, World Learning Inc., a Washington-based organisation, facilitates quality education, skill learning for youth, teachers training and many more projects in Pakistan. It regularly does projects with USAID, connecting the US population indirectly with the projects in Pakistan (World Learning, 2018). Several other organisations are working in Pakistan in the education sector and poverty alleviation; of these, Mercy Corps, The Carter Center, The Citizens Foundation, and Malala Fund are a few mentionable names.

6.3. Pak-US civil society collaboration in environmental pillar

Environmental sustainability focuses on maintaining a productive and resilient natural environment that supports human life (Mensah 2019). It addresses ecosystem integrity, the carrying capacity of the natural environment, and the sustainable use of natural capital (Mensah, 2019). Growing demands and technological advancements challenge environmental limits, highlighted by concerns such as climate change and biodiversity loss (Ana Maria, 2015; Mensah, 2019). Interpretation of environmental pillar in terms of foreign policy ensures that countries meet the international environmental protection and conservation standards. Sustainability is achieved when economic or social growth does not undermine the ecological factor.

Pakistan is a country that, despite having a meagre 0.9% contribution to global greenhouse gas emissions, faces excellent risk of environmental disaster (Government of Pakistan, 2021). At the same time, Pakistan is the only country in the region that is committed to increasing its forest cover, and it sees a 3.74% increase in its mangrove cover each year (Government of Pakistan, 2021). This commitment provides an excellent opportunity for the United States to collaborate and work toward a greener future. America, too, is at significant risk of environmental crisis and annually loses billions of dollars in economic loss due to environmental disasters. Smith (2023) reports that the United States faced a more significant than a trillion dollars loss between 2016 to 2022 and five thousand people due to environmental disasters such as tornadoes, hurricanes, etc. Pew reports that over two-thirds of people in America think that climate change should be taken seriously, and that the federal government is not taking sufficient action to deal with the crisis (Tyson and Kennedy, 2020). In this light, there is room for the United States to collaborate with other countries, such as Pakistan, which have successfully conducted environmental projects.

6.3.1. Successful cases of environmental development through CSO action

At the same time, thriving civil society collaboration initiatives in Pakistan highlight the government's initiative to deal with environmental problems. One of these initiatives is the latest project called "Recharge Pakistan", which is a multi-stakeholder initiative involving the corporate and governmental sector's approval and sponsorship, and that is under implementation by a CSO called the Green Climate Fund (Green Climate Fund, 2023). The

government of the United States, through USAID, funded five million dollars in this initiative and five million dollars from the Coca-Cola Foundation, which is also an American company.

Green Climate Fund (2023) states that “the primary objective of the Recharge Pakistan initiative is to transform the country’s approach to flood and water resource management in local watershed sites in the Indus Basin River system”. The project directly follows SDG 13, which aims to take urgent action to combat climate change and its impacts, specifically SDG Target 13.1, which advocates to “strengthen resilience and adaptive capacity to climate-related hazards and natural disasters in all countries” (United Nations, 2016).

The United States Ambassador to Pakistan viewed the initiative as a “groundbreaking partnership” between the two governments (NDRMF, 2023). However, it would be remiss not to acknowledge that this partnership is being brought to fruition through a civil society organisation. This project solidifies the research's stance that CSOs can be used as a potent instrument to execute foreign policy and build more sustainable ties between the two states.

7. Analysis: achieving sustainable cooperation

There is no doubt that sustainable development is a comprehensive agenda that reaches all levels of society and promotes just and equitable development across the globe. To this end, it emphasises and recognises the need for global partnerships. However, international partnerships cannot occur without making bilateral relations between states more amicable and sustainable development friendly. Sustainable development provides a shared vision that is concrete and implementable, enabling countries to collaborate effectively. This advances the debate on extending International Relations theory and approaches in a sustainable direction and uncovers areas for further research on the instruments needed to realise this vision. This research highlights one such instrument that can be pivotal for sustainable development and bilateral cooperation: civil society.

The research demonstrates that US-originating CSOs are successfully advancing towards achieving SDGs while operating in Pakistan. It further underscores the concept of a global civil society working at an international level between states, with government collaboration in the form of financial assistance. This indicates that conventional methods of cooperation and assistance, such as financial aid, can be more effectively utilised by dedicating them to civil society-led operations focused on sustainable development. Such collaboration is people-driven and development-oriented, qualities that make it resilient to the volatility of the political sphere. Despite recent years of strained ties between Pakistan and the US, especially under the Biden administration, civil society operations have continued to impact millions of people in Pakistan across social, economic, and environmental spheres. This demonstrates that civil society operations are more resilient than other forms of cooperation.

Furthermore, this approach offers a vision to bridge policy gaps between Pakistan and the US,

which have failed to move beyond transactional ties. Civil society operations not only improve the image of one country among the masses of another but also create a deeper level of engagement that can outlast individual governments. In a globalised world, foreign policies should consider the interests of familiar people. It may be time to view foreign policy and diplomatic engagement through a lens of sustainability, gradually pivoting from failing geostrategies. As shown in this research, a dedicated foreign policy that uses civil society as the instrument of implementation can lead to greater developmental cooperation. Pakistan and the US could benefit even more by focusing their foreign policies on sustainable development goals and involving civil society in mutual collaboration. This model, which may seem utopian, is shown in this research to be practical and implementable and can be applied to any two states struggling to find a mutually beneficial vision.

Barral's (2012) study proves that the sustainable development agenda can take a binding form on an international level, and adding to this, the practical context of civil society actions makes the possibility of effective sustainable cooperation a reality. It creates room for a foreign policy approach based and a visionary approach promising a future of mutually beneficial ties across states. This means that sustainable cooperation on a global scale can also take a tangible form when broken down and implemented on a bilateral level using already existing institutions and organisations. This also effectively adds more data and creates evidence to support the Sustainable Development Paradigm emerging within the field of IR.

In light of the discussion and research results, it is also evident that countries may face challenges in implementing *sustainable* cooperation, such as issues with resource allocation, scalability, political will, coordination and security concerns. Addressing these challenges will be crucial to realizing the full potential of civil society in sustainable international relations. However, with the right policy vision and governmental collaboration, these challenges can be successfully overcome, as demonstrated by the successful case studies presented in this research. The *sustainable* bilateral cooperation model is optimal due to its alignment with the SDGs, resilience, and practical significance.

8. Conclusion

In conclusion, this research highlights the potential for building a sustainable relationship between Pakistan and the US by focusing on sustainable development goals and using civil society as the instrument for implementation. The findings suggest that integrating global civil society into foreign policy can create a more resilient and development-oriented approach, ultimately leading to more sustainable partnerships between states. This model offers a practical and implementable strategy for countries seeking to align their foreign relations with the global sustainability agenda. It also provides a shared vision to countries struggling to build amicable ties due to failing policies. Hence, it can be stated that cooperation between two states can be enhanced via civil society action, while gaining policy clarity, financial assistance and support from the governments.

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