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**Headline: Localisation of SDG 16 – opportunities for justice sector**

## **Localisation of SDG 16 – opportunities for justice sector**

Pakistan's justice system needs reforms: local courts, digital platforms, and blockchain to restore trust.



Pakistan's justice sector faces deep challenges, including severe case backlogs, high costs, pervasive corruption and limited accessibility, all eroding public trust. These issues contribute to Pakistan's low rank on the World Justice Project's Rule of Law Index, highlighting the need for meaningful reform. The Sustainable Development Goal 16 (SDG 16), which promotes peace, justice and strong institutions, offers a pathway for Pakistan to revamp its justice system by adapting these principles to local needs. The localisation of SDG 16 would involve reforms that make justice accessible, transparent, affordable and efficient. This approach draws from global best practices while exploring technologies like blockchain to ensure transparency and accountability. By addressing these core issues, Pakistan can work toward restoring public confidence in its justice sector.

Pakistan's justice system has millions of pending cases, some unresolved for years. High legal costs and procedural delays deter many citizens from seeking justice. To make justice accessible, Pakistan could establish local courts and community-based mediation centres in rural and underserved areas, inspired by Bangladesh's village courts and India's Lok Adalats. These local courts would resolve minor disputes quickly, bringing "justice to the doorstep", easing burdens on higher courts, and offering citizens timely resolutions close to home.

Digitalisation can further provide "justice in the palm". India's e-courts allow citizens to access case statuses, schedules and judgments online, reducing the need for in-person visits. Pakistan could adopt a similar system, creating a mobile app or online platform enabling citizens to monitor cases, submit documents and even attend virtual hearings. For those without internet access, SMS-based updates or kiosks at community centers could

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serve as alternative access points, making the justice system more user-friendly. Blockchain technology offers an additional layer of transparency and security. Through the application of blockchain to store tamper-proof records of land ownership, legal documents and court proceedings, Pakistan could address common issues such as land disputes and forgery. Blockchain's immutable records would provide secure, verifiable ownership data, limiting opportunities for fraud and reducing reliance on corrupt intermediaries.

Nepal provides a strong model for transparency and accountability in its justice sector. It established anonymous reporting channels and oversight bodies to address judicial corruption. Pakistan could adopt similar measures, implementing reporting channels that allow citizens to report misconduct safely and oversight committees to monitor judicial practices. Mexico's digital case-tracking system, which allows citizens to track their cases in real-time, is another model worth emulating. A blockchain-based case-tracking system in Pakistan would give citizens visibility into case progress and deter corruption, building public confidence.

Singapore's efficient justice system is an example of digital innovation to improve judicial processes. Through its electronic litigation platform, Singapore enables citizens to file cases, access documents and participate in hearings online, drastically reducing processing times. Singapore has also introduced AI for case management, assigning cases by complexity and automating tasks. A similar approach in Pakistan would streamline case management and allocate resources effectively, helping to clear backlogs and restore public faith in timely justice.

High legal costs in Pakistan prevent many from accessing the justice system. Establishing Alternative Dispute Resolution (ADR) centres, as seen in Ghana, could provide affordable pathways for conflict resolution. Blockchain could support ADR by creating a secure digital platform for negotiations and settlements, allowing citizens to resolve disputes without extensive court involvement. This would be especially useful in rural areas with limited formal legal infrastructure. Legal literacy is another critical element of justice reform. In Pakistan, many citizens are unaware of their legal rights and resources. Sri Lanka has successfully partnered with NGOs to run legal awareness campaigns in local languages, helping citizens understand their rights and engage with the justice system. Pakistan could adopt similar campaigns, using radio, social media and community workshops to educate the public. Blockchain could also support this by providing secure, verified information about cases, rights and resources, empowering citizens to navigate the system confidently.

International organisations such as UNDP, World Bank and Transparency International bring valuable expertise and resources for justice reform. Pakistan can collaborate with these organisations for technical assistance, funding and training on digital platforms and blockchain technology. Such partnerships would enhance Pakistan's reform efforts, aligning its justice system with global standards and bolstering public confidence in the reforms.

Localising SDG 16 presents Pakistan with an opportunity to create a justice sector that is accessible, transparent and trusted. Drawing inspiration from Bangladesh, India, Nepal, Mexico, Ghana, Sri Lanka and Singapore, Pakistan can adopt proven models and integrate modern technologies to meet its unique needs. Implementing local courts, digital platforms, blockchain, ADR centres and legal literacy campaigns would deliver justice closer to citizens, whether at their doorstep or in the palm of their hand. Each reform uniquely builds public trust. Local courts and ADR centres make justice affordable and expedite dispute resolutions, showing citizens that justice is inclusive and accessible. Digital and blockchain systems increase transparency, giving the public insight into the judicial process and holding officials accountable. Legal literacy campaigns empower citizens, fostering confidence in the justice system.

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A just society is grounded in a justice system that is fair, timely and accessible. By aligning with SDG 16 and addressing Pakistan's specific needs, the justice sector can restore public trust, strengthen the rule of law and create a system that citizens can rely on. This journey toward an inclusive, modern justice system is crucial to Pakistan's progress, establishing a foundation for a peaceful, fair society where justice is available to all.