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Normative alignment and institutional constraints in Sustainable Development Goals implementation in Pakistan

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Abstract

Achieving the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) requires translating global ambitions into locally legitimate and institutionally workable interventions. While prior research has focused on governance and political-economic barriers, less attention has been paid to how locally salient ethical frameworks shape the legitimacy of sustainability initiatives in developing countries. This study examines how global SDG priorities align with embedded ethical values and what challenges constrain their implementation. Drawing on an in-depth qualitative case study of a large-scale urban development project in Pakistan, the analysis uses interviews, documents, and visual data to explore the interaction between normative alignment and institutional conditions. The findings show that Islamic ethical principles closely align with SDG priorities related to social welfare, environmental stewardship, justice, and collective responsibility, enhancing project legitimacy. However, implementation remains constrained by institutional challenges, including financing uncertainty, land disputes, political instability, macroeconomic volatility, and bureaucratic rigidity. The study highlights the need to integrate normative legitimacy with institutional feasibility to achieve sustainable development outcomes.

Introduction

Accelerating ecosystem degradation, intensifying climate change, widening inequality, and persistent poverty have pushed “development” to the forefront of global policy debates. In response, all UN member states adopted the 2030 Agenda and its 17 Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) in 2015, signaling a shared commitment to improving human well-being while safeguarding planetary systems (United Nations, 2015, 2017, 2025). Yet translating this agenda into practice remains uneven. Across many low- and middle-income settings, SDG implementation is constrained by fiscal stress, institutional fragmentation, contested land and resource governance, and political volatility, conditions that often generate gaps between stated sustainability commitments and realized outcomes (Watkins et al., 2022). These constraints matter because the SDGs are not only a set of targets; they are an attempt to steer development as a multi-level process of change involving states, markets, institutions, and communities. The SDGs also represent a historical shift in global development thinking, extending earlier poverty-focused agendas toward an integrated framework that explicitly links economic development, social inclusion, and environmental sustainability (Sachs, 2012). This broader framing reinforces the expectation that development interventions address interdependent challenges rather than isolated sectoral goals.

A growing body of scholarship frames SDG implementation challenges as “grand challenges”: complex, uncertain, and interdependent problems that link global aspirations with local political economies and lived realities (Ferraro et al., 2015; George et al., 2023). Grand challenge responses frequently take the form of large-scale, multi-actor programs and urban or infrastructure interventions intended to deliver partial but consequential improvements, especially where environmental risks, urban pressures, and development deficits intersect. However, case-based evidence from non-Western contexts remains comparatively limited, and the literature often under-specifies why some SDG-oriented interventions

secure social acceptance and political traction while others become contested, delayed, or reshaped by conflict over resources, rights, and authority (De Moura et al., 2025; Röell et al., 2024; Bain et al., 2019).

One under-examined dimension is the role of normative institutions, moral, cultural, and religious frameworks, in shaping development priorities, legitimacy, and stakeholder support (Okitasari & Katramiz, 2022). Much SDG and sustainability research treats implementation as primarily technocratic, focusing on planning capacity, coordination, or metrics, while giving less analytical attention to how ethical systems shape what is considered legitimate, fair, and "developmental" in specific settings. This omission is consequential in Muslim-majority societies where Islamic ethical principles are often mobilized in public discourse, governance, and claims-making over land, welfare, and environmental responsibility. Concepts such as khilāfah (stewardship), ʿadl (justice), maslahah (public welfare), and isrāf (avoidance of waste) provide a normative vocabulary that can support environmental protection and social equity (Abdullah, 2018; Bsoul et al., 2022). At the same time, invoking such principles does not automatically resolve distributional conflict, institutional weakness, or political contestation: precisely the conditions that often shape development trajectories.

This paper examines these issues through an in-depth case of the Ravi Riverfront Urban Development Project (RRUDP) in Punjab, Pakistan. RRUDP is a large urban intervention that seeks to address intertwined development challenges along the Ravi River corridor, including environmental degradation, water pollution, flooding risk, and unplanned urban expansion. The initiative is explicitly framed as contributing to multiple SDGs, most directly clean water and sanitation (SDG 6), sustainable cities and communities (SDG 11), climate action (SDG 13), decent work and economic growth (SDG 8), industry, innovation and infrastructure (SDG 9), and life on land (SDG 15). It is also situated in a context where Islamic ethical concepts shape public expectations of justice, welfare, and environmental responsibility. This makes RRUDP a useful site for analyzing how global sustainability norms and locally salient moral frameworks interact with the institutional and political-economic constraints that condition development practice.

Recent work on SDG governance emphasizes the importance of alignment mechanisms that translate global goals into locally legitimate practices across institutional and cultural contexts (Wiegant et al., 2024). Our findings suggest that Islamic ethical concepts function as such an alignment mechanism, enabling SDG priorities to be framed in terms of justice, public welfare, and stewardship.

The study asks two research questions:

RQ1

How do the SDGs align with an Islamic ethical framework in grand challenge interventions?

RQ2

What are the implementation challenges faced by SDG-oriented grand challenge interventions?

The paper makes three contributions to development scholarship. First, it foregrounds the role of Islamic ethical principles as a normative institution that can shape the framing and legitimacy of SDG-oriented development interventions, helping to explain why particular sustainability claims resonate in Muslim-majority settings. Second, it contributes case-based evidence from Pakistan to debates on SDG implementation under conditions of institutional uncertainty, highlighting how political and administrative realities can impede the translation of sustainability intent into outcomes. Third, it identifies and organizes the most salient constraints that practitioners and policymakers must address, especially those related to financing, land governance, continuity across political cycles, and procedural capacity, thereby offering lessons with relevance beyond the case.

Literature Review

Grand challenges and the Sustainable Development Goals

Grand challenges are widely understood as complex, persistent societal problems of global significance that are characterized by uncertainty, ambiguity, and interdependence, and that require collective action to address (Ferraro et al., 2015; George et al., 2016; Howard-Grenville, 2021). These challenges include poverty, inequality, climate change, public health crises, rapid urbanization, and sustainability transitions, problems that cut across sectors, jurisdictions, and levels of governance (Etzion et al., 2017; George et al., 2023). A defining feature of grand challenges is their “wicked” nature: interventions often generate unintended consequences, reveal new trade-offs, or shift problems rather than resolve them definitively (Ferraro et al., 2015).

Despite variation in definitions, literature converges on several core attributes. First, grand challenges are inherently complex, involving nonlinear interactions among social, economic, environmental, and institutional factors (Ferraro et al., 2015; Ika & Munro, 2022b). Second, they are marked by deep uncertainty, making it difficult to specify solutions ex ante or to evaluate success using narrow performance criteria (Grodal & O’Mahony, 2017). Third, they entail contested values and interests, as different social groups prioritize competing objectives and distributive outcomes (Jarzabkowski et al., 2019). Fourth, their impacts are frequently global while being experienced locally, requiring coordination across multiple levels of governance (George et al., 2016). Finally, grand challenges unfold over long-time horizons, with consequences that extend across political cycles and generations (George et al., 2023).

The SDGs represent the most prominent global policy framework for addressing these interlinked challenges. Adopted by all United Nations member states in 2015, the 2030 Agenda articulates a shared vision for advancing human well-being while protecting planetary systems (United Nations, 2015, 2017). The SDGs explicitly recognize the interconnected nature of development problems and call for integrated responses that cut across traditional policy silos (Fernhaber & Zou, 2022; Ika et al., 2024). As such, a growing body of scholarship treats the SDGs not merely as a set of targets, but as a governance framework for addressing grand challenges through coordinated action among states, markets, and civil society (Brammer et al., 2019; George et al., 2023).

At the same time, researchers caution against viewing the SDGs as a fixed or exhaustive list of development priorities. New challenges continue to emerge, while existing ones evolve in response to political, economic, and environmental change (Howard-Grenville, 2021). Moreover, the translation of SDG commitments into practice remains uneven, particularly in low- and middle-income countries where fiscal constraints, institutional fragmentation, and political instability shape development trajectories (Watkins et al., 2022). Reflecting this perspective, this study treats grand challenges and the SDGs as analytically intertwined: the SDGs provide a global articulation of grand challenges, while grand challenge research helps explain why SDG implementation is often partial, contested, and uneven across contexts.

Recent development scholarship highlights that achieving the SDGs requires moving beyond target-based planning towards integrated industrial and institutional strategies that explicitly prioritize human development outcomes (Béné, 2022). In contexts marked by fiscal stress and governance fragmentation, sustainability agendas are particularly vulnerable to implementation failure despite strong normative commitment.

Large-scale development interventions as responses to grand challenges

Responses to grand challenges and SDG priorities frequently take the form of large-scale development interventions, particularly in urban and infrastructure sectors. These interventions are characterized by long horizons, multiple stakeholders, and significant social and environmental impacts (Davies, 2017; Locatelli et al., 2023). Rather than delivering definitive solutions, such initiatives typically aim to generate incremental improvements, mitigate risks, and create pathways for longer-term transformation (Ferraro et al., 2015; George et al., 2023).

The literature highlights several recurring features of these interventions. They tend to involve diverse actors across public and private sectors, require coordination across institutional boundaries, and operate under conditions of uncertainty and political contestation (Ika & Munro, 2022a). Their outcomes are often evaluative rather than purely technical, as assessments of success depend on stakeholder perceptions, distributive effects, and normative judgments about fairness, legitimacy, and sustainability (Whyte & Mottee, 2022). Importantly, such interventions frequently generate unintended consequences, particularly where land, livelihoods, and environmental resources are reallocated (Winch et al., 2021).

While existing research has advanced understanding of coordination and complexity in large-scale initiatives, it has paid comparatively less attention to the normative foundations that shape legitimacy and public acceptance (Zakhour, 2020). Much of the literature emphasizes governance arrangements, adaptive capacity, and learning, but often treats values, ethics, and moral authority as background conditions rather than central analytical concerns. This gap is significant in development contexts where moral and religious institutions play a prominent role in shaping public discourse, claims-making, and expectations of justice and welfare (King et al., 2020).

Research on green industrialization further demonstrates that sustainability transitions hinge on governance capacity, policy sequencing, and coordination across state agencies rather than isolated project-level interventions (Ferrannini et al., 2019). This reinforces the need to analyze SDG-oriented initiatives as institutional projects embedded in political and administrative systems.

Normative institutions, religion, and development legitimacy

Development processes are embedded in institutional environments that extend beyond formal rules and organizations to include normative systems, belief structures, and moral frameworks. In many societies, religious traditions constitute a powerful source of legitimacy and meaning, shaping how development goals are interpreted and contested. In Muslim-majority contexts, Islamic ethical principles, such as stewardship of the Earth (khilāfah), justice (adl), public welfare (maslahah), and avoidance of waste (isrāf), provide a moral vocabulary that can support environmental protection and social equity (Abdullah, 2018; Bsoul et al., 2022).

Despite this, religious ethics remain underexplored in mainstream SDG and development scholarship, particularly in empirical studies of large-scale interventions. Where religion is considered, it is often treated descriptively rather than analytically or confined to discussions of culture rather than governance and institutional legitimacy. This limit understanding of how normative alignment, or misalignment, between global development agendas and local moral frameworks shapes implementation dynamics, stakeholder support, and conflict (Immler & Sakkers, 2022).

Addressing this gap, this study examines how SDG priorities intersect with Islamic ethical perspectives in the context of a major urban development intervention in Pakistan. By analyzing both normative alignment and implementation challenges, the study contributes to development research on how global sustainability agendas are mediated by local institutional environments. In doing so, it responds to calls for more context-sensitive, case-based research that explains not only whether SDG-oriented interventions succeed or fail, but why development trajectories unfold as they do in specific political, cultural, and institutional settings.

Methodology

Research design

This study adopts a qualitative single-case research design to examine how global sustainability agendas are interpreted and implemented within a specific development context. Case-based approaches are well suited to development research that seeks to understand complex, context-dependent processes, particularly where institutional, political, and normative dynamics shape outcomes (Hartley, 2004; Yin, 2018). A single case allows for in-depth analysis of mechanisms and constraints that are difficult to capture through cross-sectional or purely quantitative designs.

The RRUDP in Lahore, Pakistan, was selected as a theoretically relevant and information-rich case. It represents a large-scale development intervention explicitly framed as contributing to multiple SDGs, while operating within a Muslim-majority context where Islamic ethical principles are salient in public discourse and governance. The case therefore provides an appropriate setting for exploring (i) how SDG priorities are aligned with Islamic ethical principles, and (ii) the implementation challenges that shape the delivery of SDG-oriented development interventions. The analysis follows inductive and interpretive logic, allowing patterns and themes to emerge from empirical material while being informed by existing literature on grand challenges and development.

Case context: Ravi Riverfront Urban Development Project

The Ravi River is one of the six rivers of the Indus Basin system, flowing from India into Pakistan. Under the Indus Waters Treaty of 1960, the waters of the Ravi are allocated primarily to India, and extensive upstream infrastructure has substantially reduced downstream flows into Pakistan. More than 50 million people live within the Ravi Basin in Pakistan, and the river historically provided critical ecosystem services supporting agriculture, livelihoods, and urban development in Punjab. Approximately 75% of the basin is used for agriculture, with irrigation supporting around 2.9 million hectares, roughly 30% of Pakistan's cultivated land. The river also historically supported diverse aquatic and terrestrial ecosystems that contributed to local livelihoods.

Since the 1990s, however, the Ravi has experienced severe environmental degradation. Rapid urbanization, industrial expansion, and agricultural intensification have proceeded without adequate wastewater treatment, pollution control, or regulatory enforcement. Major pollution sources include untreated household sewage, industrial effluents, agricultural runoff, and solid waste dumping. Outside the monsoon season, river flows range approximately between 175 and 2,000 cusecs, rendering the river largely non-perennial and undermining its ecological function.

The RRUDP was conceptualized in 2013 with the stated objective of ecological revitalization of the river alongside the development of a new urban corridor. The project envisions river recharge, ecosystem restoration, and the creation of a planned green city along a 46-kilometre stretch of the riverfront, positioning it among the largest riverfront development initiatives globally. A feasibility study was undertaken in 2014 by an international architectural consultancy, followed by the preparation of a strategic development plan in 2015. In 2020, the project was formally inaugurated, and the Ravi Urban Development Authority (RUDA) was established as an autonomous statutory body responsible for governance and implementation. The project has an estimated budget of approximately PKR 5 trillion, an anticipated implementation horizon of 35 years, and is designed to be largely self-financed through domestic and foreign investment.

Data collection

Data were collected from multiple sources to enable triangulation and to capture different perspectives on project framing, governance, and implementation (Yin, 2018). The primary data source comprised

semi-structured, face-to-face interviews conducted with key actors involved in the project. Interviewees included senior and mid-level officials from the implementing authority, project directors, deputy directors, project managers, planning engineers, and representatives of design and review consultants. Interviews lasted between 30 and 92 minutes and focused on participants' roles, perceptions of SDG alignment, ethical framing, and implementation challenges. A snowball sampling approach was used to identify additional informants with relevant experience. All interviews were audio-recorded with consent and transcribed verbatim.

Visual materials were collected to enrich contextual understanding. These included publicly available videos and images documenting project announcements, site visits, presentations, and public communication. A total of 62 videos (ranging from 1 to 13 minutes) available through official channels on platforms such as YouTube and LinkedIn were transcribed. In addition, 332 images containing textual and visual information were collected and analyzed. Visual data were treated as contextual artefacts that provide insight into how the project is framed and communicated, rather than as self-explanatory evidence (Miles et al., 2014).

Archival and documentary materials constituted a third data source. Forty-eight internal and publicly accessible documents were collected, including feasibility studies, strategic and master planning documents, environmental impact assessment reports, design layouts, engineering drawings, court judgments, development bank reports, and policy and regulatory materials. Documents were obtained directly from informants or accessed electronically. Together, these materials provided a longitudinal and institutional perspective on the project's evolution.

Data analysis

Data were analyzed using thematic analysis, which enables systematic identification and interpretation of patterns across qualitative material (Braun & Clarke, 2012). An abductive approach was adopted, combining sensitivity to empirical data with engagement with relevant theoretical concepts from the grand challenges and development literature (Dunne & Dougherty, 2016).

Analysis proceeded in several iterative stages. First, all interview transcripts, visual data transcriptions, and documents were read repeatedly to achieve familiarization and to develop an initial understanding of salient issues. Second, initial codes were generated manually, guided by the research questions but open to emergent insights. Third, codes were grouped into broader categories and themes through constant comparison within the case. Fourth, themes were reviewed and refined to ensure internal coherence and consistency with the data. Where feasible, emerging interpretations were discussed with selected participants to enhance credibility. Finally, themes were clearly defined and articulated in relation to both empirical material and broader literature.

Three overarching themes emerged from the analysis: (i) Islamic ethical perspectives on SDGs, and (ii) key implementation challenges shaping SDG-oriented development interventions. Findings are presented

with illustrative quotations and triangulated with documentary and visual evidence to strengthen robustness.

Ethical and interpretive considerations

The Islamic teachings are used analytically to interpret how ethical concepts are invoked and mobilized by actors, rather than to advance theological claims. Throughout the research process, care was taken to ensure confidentiality, informed consent, and respectful treatment of participants and cultural contexts.

Findings

Islamic ethical framing and SDG legitimacy

Across interviews and public-facing communications, RRUDP was repeatedly framed as a development intervention that advances SDG-relevant objectives, especially those related to water, environmental restoration, urban sustainability, livelihoods, and institutional modernization. Participants also frequently articulated these priorities through Islamic ethical language. Rather than presenting Islamic teachings as an alternative development model, respondents mobilized Islamic principles as a normative vocabulary that renders sustainability claims locally intelligible and morally legitimate. In this sense, Islamic ethics functioned as a source of public justification for development priorities that are otherwise often debated in terms of technocratic planning, investment returns, and administrative feasibility.

Two patterns were consistent. First, Islamic ethics were used to support welfare and inclusion narratives, particularly around jobs, basic services, education, and dignity. For instance, employment generation and livelihoods were framed as both an economic objective and a moral duty to improve living standards: “We are creating around 1.5 million jobs, which will run economic cycle.” (Director planning, Implementing agency). Similarly, plans for education and skills were framed as investments in human development: “We will build centers for vocational trainings so that we can develop technical skills.” (Project director, Contractor 1). In several instances, participants used Islam-informed ideas of justice and equal worth to explain commitments to inclusion and non-discrimination: “The environment is inclusive and equitable… there is no consideration of gender.” (Director planning, Implementing agency). (We treat such claims as framing rather than verified outcomes.)

Second, Islamic ethics were used to support environmental stewardship and harm reduction, particularly around water, pollution control, waste management, biodiversity, and climate adaptation. Respondents framed river rehabilitation and water treatment as responsibilities to protect shared resources and avoid preventable harm: “In the rehabilitation of River Ravi, we are going to treat that drain’s water through water treatment plants… Once we raise the water level in Ravi, the ground water recharge will increase.” (Deputy director infrastructure, Implementing agency). Waste reduction and recycling were similarly presented as practical expressions of avoiding waste: “We are applying to an integrated solid waste management model… reduce, reuse, recycle and recover.” (Deputy director planning, Implementing agency). Biodiversity-related design elements were discussed as part of an ecological restoration logic:

“We have included fish migration in the barrages… kept some crevices where fish lay eggs.” (Director hydrology, Implementing agency). Public awareness campaigns were framed as necessary for behavioral change: “We have to create awareness… campaigns… plantation drives… public awareness sessions.” (Director planning, Implementing agency).

Table 1 maps selected SDG that are most pertinent to the Ravi Riverfront Urban Development Project to two key dimensions: (i) the Islamic ethical concepts invoked by project actors, and (ii) the concrete implementation practices described in interviews and documentary materials. Rather than providing an exhaustive overview of all 17 SDGs, the table concentrates on those goals that RRUDP explicitly prioritizes, particularly goals related to water and sanitation, sustainable cities, responsible consumption, climate action, biodiversity protection, and livelihoods. This focused approach highlights how global sustainability priorities are interpreted and operationalized within the specific normative and institutional context of the case.

The mapping illustrates that Islamic ethical language is frequently mobilized to frame SDG-related objectives in terms of justice, public welfare, and environmental stewardship, thereby enhancing the perceived legitimacy of the project. At the same time, the table makes visible the distinction between normative alignment and implementation outcomes. While ethical framing supports acceptance and justification of SDG-oriented claims, it does not in itself resolve distributional conflicts or overcome institutional and political-economic constraints. Instead, normative alignment coexists with, and in some instances accentuates, contestation over land, resources, authority, and delivery capacity.

Table 1
Normative alignment between selected SDGs and Islamic ethical concepts: Evidence from RRUDP

Sustainability dimension	SDG focus (selected)	Development objective in RRUDP	Islamic ethical concept mobilized by actors	Mechanism for development, legitimacy and coordination	Illustrative evidence
People	SDG 1 No poverty; SDG 8 Decent work	Employment creation, livelihood generation, skills development	Maslahah (public welfare); Adl (justice)	Frames employment and skills provision as moral obligations rather than discretionary economic benefits, strengthening claims of social value.	"We are creating around 1.5 million jobs, which will run the economic cycle." (Director planning, Implementing agency)
	SDG 4 Quality education	Education city, vocational and technical training	Ilm (knowledge as obligation); Maslahah	Justifies long-term investment in education as essential for societal development rather than short-term returns.	"We will build centers for vocational trainings so that we can develop technical skills." (Project director, Contractor)
Planet	SDG 6 Clean water and sanitation	River rehabilitation, wastewater treatment, groundwater recharge	Khilāfah (stewardship); Isrāf (avoidance of waste)	Frames pollution control and water conservation as ethical duties, supporting regulatory intervention and public compliance.	"Once we raise the water level in Ravi, the ground water recharge will increase." (Deputy director infrastructure)
	SDG 11 Sustainable cities	Planned urban development, pollution monitoring, green infrastructure	Khilāfah; Mīzān (balance)	Supports claims that urban development must maintain ecological balance, legitimizing environmental monitoring	"Smart sensors will detect smog, fire, intrusion… growth of trees will be monitored." (Visual data)

Sustainability dimension	SDG focus (selected)	Development objective in RRUDP	Islamic ethical concept mobilized by actors	Mechanism for development, legitimacy and coordination	Illustrative evidence
				and restrictions.	
	SDG 12 Responsible consumption	Integrated solid waste management	Isrāf	Positions waste reduction and recycling as moral imperatives rather than purely technical solutions.	“We are applying a reduce, reuse, recycle, recover model.” (Deputy director planning)
	SDG 13 Climate action	Public awareness campaigns, plantation drives	Sadaqah jāriyah (continuing charity); Khilāfah	Encourages behavioral change by linking climate action to moral responsibility and long-term reward.	“We run campaigns on smog, waste, and plantation… public awareness sessions.” (Director planning)
	SDG 15 Life on land	Biodiversity restoration, urban forests, river ecology	Respect for creation; Khilāfah	Frames biodiversity protection as stewardship of all living communities, legitimizing ecological design choices.	“We included fish migration… crevices where fish lay eggs.” (Director hydrology)
Prosperity	SDG 9 Infrastructure	Sustainable industrial zoning, emission control	Adl; Mīzān	Justifies regulating industry to prevent harm and maintain fairness between economic growth and environmental protection.	“We are controlling emissions… all raw materials will be sustainable.” (Deputy director infrastructure)
Peace / Institutions	SDG 16 Strong institutions	Smart governance, security infrastructure,	Adl; accountability	Frames institutional strengthening as justice-enhancing	“CCTV, intelligent transport systems… will enhance

Sustainability dimension	SDG focus (selected)	Development objective in RRUDP	Islamic ethical concept mobilized by actors	Mechanism for development, legitimacy and coordination	Illustrative evidence
		institutional capacity		rather than surveillance-oriented.	security." (Director planning)
Partnership	SDG 17 Partnerships	Collaboration with development banks and international agencies	Ta□āwun (cooperation for good)	Normalizes multi-actor partnerships as ethically appropriate collective action.	"We have partnerships with World Bank, and UNDP." (Senior engineer, Design consultant)

Constraints shaping implementation of an SDG-oriented development intervention

Five interrelated constraints emerged as most salient in shaping RRUDP implementation. These are presented as development-relevant bottlenecks that condition whether sustainability intent can translate into outcomes.

Financing constraints in long-horizon development

Participants consistently described financing as a central risk for a multi-decade intervention. Because RRUDP's sequencing requires early enabling infrastructure to attract later investment, delays or shortfalls in financing were described as threatening the entire development pathway: "Execution is directly proportional to the funding." (Director, Review consultant). Respondents emphasized that the project is expected to mobilize resources largely through investment under a PPP model rather than through predictable public financing, increasing vulnerability to shifts in investor confidence: "We are not given any money by the government… If there is no investment, then everything will suffer." (Deputy director planning, Implementing agency). This finding is developmentally significant because it highlights the tension between long-term sustainability commitments and short-term financing realities, especially in contexts where capital markets, guarantees, and fiscal space are constrained.

Land acquisition, compensation conflict, and social contestation

Land acquisition emerged as a major driver of delay, conflict, and cost escalation. Respondents framed unresolved ownership disputes as a practical barrier to implementation: "The biggest hurdle is land acquisition… [it] has increased the project cost to a great extent." (Environment specialist, Implementing agency). Visual data and interview accounts described early resistance among landowners, with mistrust shaped by uncertainty about compensation and process integrity: "Farmers and landlords… were very

resistant… 'who knows if they will pay us or not.'" (Visual data). For development scholarship, this underscores that sustainability-oriented projects are also distributive interventions: they reallocate land and value and therefore generate contestation that must be managed through credible, transparent, and fair processes.

Political instability and policy discontinuity

Studies of long-term infrastructure reforms highlight the importance of adaptive policy implementation in contexts characterized by institutional change and political volatility (Alaerts, 2020). Consistent with this, RRUDP illustrates how rigid procedures and policy discontinuities constrain learning and adaptation in grand challenge projects. Respondents repeatedly link implementation uncertainty to political turnover and shifting priorities. Changes in government were described as triggering changes in planning priorities, disrupting continuity, and eroding investor confidence, particularly given reliance on a PPP model: "As soon as a new government comes, they have different priorities… Investors… lose their trust." (Deputy director planning, Implementing agency). Participants also emphasized administrative reshuffles and "changes in thought process" as risks to maintaining project direction over time: "Continuity of thought and sticking to the basic concept are crucial." (Project director, Contractor 1). This highlights a key development challenge: long-horizon sustainability interventions often require institutional arrangements that can outlast political cycles.

Macroeconomic volatility and investment risk

Macroeconomic volatility was described as compounding financing challenges, particularly for capital-intensive components such as wastewater treatment. One respondent described constraints linked to national macroeconomic conditions and the inability to provide guarantees, limiting the feasibility of securing investment for major facilities: "The investor wants guarantee… we get stuck." (Deputy director water treatment and waste management, Implementing agency). Participants also described inflation and price instability as undermining planning and contract performance: "Running contracts are jeopardized… We cannot estimate properly… We often run over budget." (Deputy director planning, Implementing agency). These accounts underscore that SDG implementation is shaped not only by project-level design but by macroeconomic governance and risk environments.

Procedural inconsistency and regulatory rigidity

Finally, respondents described bureaucratic procedures and regulatory rigidity as slowing implementation in a project that is otherwise framed as urgent and fast-moving. They cited coordination delays across departments, litigation risks, and "orthodox" procedural systems that could not adapt to the pace expected: "We are fast while they are orthodox… All this makes our process slow." (Deputy director planning, Implementing agency). They also pointed to business- and implementation-unfriendly regulations that slow decisions and reduce responsiveness: "People are not quick in making decisions." (Director planning, Implementing agency). For development studies, these findings speak to implementation capacity as an institutional constraint: rules and procedures intended to ensure oversight can, in practice, become bottlenecks when not fit for purpose or when enforcement is uneven.

Cross-cutting synthesis: legitimacy is not the same as delivery

Taken together, the findings show central tension. On the one hand, RRUDP is framed in ways that align SDG priorities with Islamic ethical principles, strengthening local legitimacy narratives around stewardship, justice, welfare, and harm reduction. On the other hand, implementation is shaped by binding constraints, financing fragility, contested land governance, political discontinuity, macroeconomic instability, and procedural rigidity, that can prevent SDG intent from becoming measurable, equitable outcomes. This distinction between normative alignment (legitimacy) and institutional feasibility (delivery) provides an explanatory lens that can travel beyond this case to other SDG-oriented interventions in politically and economically constrained settings.

Discussion

Normative alignment, legitimacy, and the role of Islamic ethics in SDG-oriented development

The findings show that Islamic ethical principles and the SDGs are widely perceived by project actors as normatively compatible. This alignment is not incidental. The SDGs themselves are structured around core development concerns, human welfare, equity, environmental stewardship, institutional integrity, and collective action, that resonate strongly with long-established Islamic ethical concepts such as stewardship (*khilāfah*), justice (*adl*), public welfare (*maslahah*), balance (*mīzān*), and avoidance of waste (*isrāf*) (Abdullah, 2018; Bsoul et al., 2022; Foltz et al., 2003). In this sense, the SDGs do not appear in Muslim-majority contexts as culturally alien prescriptions, but as frameworks that can be interpreted through locally salient moral vocabularies, consistent with scholarship on SDG localization and normative translation (Okitasari & Katramiz, 2022; Immler & Sakkers, 2022).

From a development perspective, the significance of this alignment lies less in theological congruence and more in legitimacy formation. In contexts such as Pakistan, where Islamic values shape public discourse, law, and institutional authority, framing sustainability interventions in Islamic ethical terms can help justify state action, mobilize public support, and normalize regulatory intervention in areas such as pollution control, land use, and resource conservation (King et al., 2020; Zakhour, 2020). Consistent with prior work on development legitimacy, moral framing operates as a complement to formal governance rather than a substitute for it (Bain et al., 2019; Okitasari & Katramiz, 2022). Islamic ethics in this case function as a normative institution that helps explain why certain SDG-aligned claims, such as environmental protection, social welfare, or long-term stewardship, are perceived as appropriate and necessary rather than optional or externally imposed. In this sense, Islamic ethical framing operates not only as a moral resource but also as an identity-shaping narrative that helps sustain collective commitment and legitimacy within a temporary and politically exposed organizational setting (Iftikhar & Sergeeva, 2024).

At the same time, the findings caution against equating normative alignment with development success. While Islamic ethics support SDG legitimacy, they do not in themselves resolve distributional conflicts, institutional weaknesses, or political constraints. This distinction is critical for development scholarship: values can legitimize action, but they cannot compensate for deficits in state capacity, fiscal space, or governance continuity (Ferraro et al., 2015; George et al., 2023). Sustainable development thus emerges as both a moral and an institutional project, requiring alignment between ethical narratives and material implementation conditions.

Financial constraints, political economy, and the limits of SDG delivery

The findings emphasize financing as a binding constraint shaping the trajectory of SDG-oriented development interventions. Unlike short-term projects, RRUDP is structured as a multi-decade intervention that requires substantial upfront investment before long-term returns can materialize. This pattern is consistent with established research on megaproject risk, which shows that large-scale, long-horizon interventions are systematically prone to financing fragility, cost escalation, and exposure to political and macroeconomic shocks, particularly in contexts of institutional uncertainty (Flyvbjerg, 2017). Reliance on public-private partnerships and investment-led financing exposes such initiatives to investor confidence, macroeconomic stability, and regulatory credibility, factors that are often volatile in developing economies (Kumaraswamy & Zhang, 2001; Xiao & Lam, 2019). From a development perspective, this highlights a structural tension: long-horizon sustainability objectives are frequently pursued through short-horizon financial mechanisms, creating fragility in implementation pathways (Hoegl et al., 2008; Precious, 2025). From a megaproject perspective, this also underlines that “success” cannot be reduced to on-time or on-budget delivery, but must be assessed in relation to long-term social, environmental, and institutional outcomes (Turner & Xue, 2018).

Land acquisition challenges further illustrate how development interventions are inherently distributive. Securing land is not merely a technical prerequisite; it involves negotiations overcompensation, livelihoods, rights, and trust in state institutions. The resistance observed in RRUDP aligns with broader development research showing that land governance failures can undermine infrastructure delivery, exacerbate inequality, and trigger social conflict (Babatunde et al., 2017; Winch et al., 2021). Importantly, normative claims grounded in justice and public welfare did not eliminate contestation; rather, they coexisted with mistrust shaped by historical experience and institutional credibility. This reinforces the view that equitable and transparent land governance is central to sustainable development outcomes (Zakhour, 2020).

Political instability and policy discontinuity emerged as additional structural constraints. Frequent changes in political leadership and administrative personnel disrupted continuity of vision, weakened investor confidence, and increased uncertainty in implementation. Development research has long shown that political instability incentivizes short-termism, discourages long-term investment, and undermines institutional learning (Fatehi-Sedeh & Safizadeh, 1989; Fosu, 2003; Priemus, 2010). The

RRUDP case illustrates how SDG-aligned initiatives remain vulnerable when governance arrangements are insufficiently insulated from electoral cycles and shifting political priorities (Nepal & Jamasb, 2012). These dynamics mirror patterns documented in other large-scale infrastructure projects in Pakistan, where political turnover, administrative reshuffles, and shifting priorities have repeatedly disrupted continuity and undermined delivery capacity (Iftikhar et al., 2021).

Macroeconomic volatility compounded these challenges. Inflation, exchange-rate instability, and debt constraints limit the feasibility of financing capital-intensive components such as wastewater treatment facilities. This finding aligns with political economy analyses of development that emphasize how external debt, conditional lending, and fiscal fragility constrain domestic policy space (Watkins et al., 2022; Béné, 2022). Even when sustainability goals are widely endorsed, macroeconomic instability can render them practically unattainable, reinforcing uneven development trajectories.

Institutional coordination, procedural rigidity, and implementation capacity

Beyond finance and politics, the findings point to institutional coordination and procedural capacity as decisive factors shaping SDG implementation. RRUDP required cooperation across multiple government departments and regulatory bodies, each operating under distinct rules, routines, and accountability structures. In practice, inconsistent procedures, bureaucratic rigidity, and slow decision-making created bottlenecks that delayed progress. These challenges reflect a broader development dilemma: regulatory systems designed to ensure oversight and accountability can, when poorly aligned with complex interventions, impede timely and adaptive action (Kadefors, 1995; Walton & Dutton, 1969).

From a development studies perspective, this highlights implementation capacity as an institutional constraint rather than a managerial failure. Weak inter-agency coordination, resistance to procedural change, and limited flexibility are symptoms of deeper governance challenges that affect many large-scale development interventions (Locatelli et al., 2023; Whyte & Mottee, 2022). Addressing such constraints requires institutional reform and learning, not merely improved planning or execution.

Legitimacy without delivery: implications for development scholarship

Taken together, the discussion reveals a central tension relevant to development research. RRUDP demonstrates strong normative alignment between SDG priorities and Islamic ethical principles, contributing to legitimacy and moral justification. However, delivery is shaped by political economy, institutional capacity, and governance continuity, which can override normative intent. This distinction helps explain why SDG-oriented initiatives may enjoy broad rhetorical support while producing uneven or delayed outcomes (Bain et al., 2019; Röell et al., 2024).

While normative alignment can strengthen legitimacy, effective SDG implementation also depends on the design of authority and coordination mechanisms across actors and levels of governance (Ebrahim et al.,

2022). The RRUDP case illustrates how legitimacy-enhancing narratives coexist with institutional constraints that shape delivery capacity.

For development scholarship, the contribution of this study lies in showing how religious ethics operate as enabling but conditional institutions in SDG implementation. Ethical alignment can facilitate acceptance and cooperation, but it cannot substitute for credible institutions, stable financing, and effective governance (Ferraro et al., 2015; George et al., 2023). Understanding sustainable development therefore requires analyzing both moral narratives and material constraints, particularly in contexts characterized by political volatility and economic fragility.

While Islamic ethical framing enhances legitimacy, the RRUDP case demonstrates that sustainable development outcomes ultimately depend on the interaction between normative institutions and political-economic and administrative capacities.

Conclusion

This study examined (i) how the SDGs resonate with Islamic ethical principles and (ii) the key constraints shaping implementation in an SDG-oriented development intervention. Drawing on evidence from the RRUDP in Pakistan, the findings show that Islamic ethics provide a coherent normative vocabulary for sustainability, linking human dignity, social justice, and environmental stewardship to SDG priorities (Abdullah, 2018; Bsoul et al., 2022; Foltz et al., 2003), while the translation of these commitments into practice is conditioned by intertwined financial, political, economic, and administrative dynamics (Ferraro et al., 2015; George et al., 2023; Watkins et al., 2022). The case thus illustrates a critical distinction between normative alignment, which supports legitimacy, and institutional feasibility, which ultimately determines delivery (Okitasari & Katramiz, 2022; Bain et al., 2019).

Theoretical implications

The study contributes to development scholarship in three ways. First, it reinforces the view that SDG implementation is not value-neutral: moral and cultural frameworks shape how sustainability is interpreted, justified, and evaluated in practice (Immler & Sakkers, 2022; King et al., 2020). Religious ethics, in this case, function as normative institutions that influence legitimacy, priority-setting, and stakeholder expectations, rather than as purely symbolic or cultural background conditions (Zakhour, 2020; Okitasari & Katramiz, 2022). Second, by analyzing how Islamic ethical concepts are mobilized alongside SDG narratives, the study highlights faith-based values as a potential translation mechanism between global development agendas and local contexts, complementing the “glocal” nature of grand challenges (George et al., 2016; George et al., 2023). Third, the findings demonstrate that outcomes in SDG-oriented interventions are shaped as much by political-economic and institutional conditions, such as financing arrangements, land governance, policy continuity, and procedural capacity, as by technical design (Ferraro et al., 2015; Locatelli et al., 2023; Whyte & Mottee, 2022). This suggests that legitimacy-

building and institutional coordination should be treated as core components of development delivery, rather than as secondary or contextual factors (Ebrahim et al., 2022).

Practical implications

For policymakers, the findings suggest that framing SDG initiatives within widely shared ethical narratives can strengthen societal acceptance and public justification, particularly in Muslim-majority contexts (Bain et al., 2019; King et al., 2020). However, such framing must be paired with credible institutional safeguards, especially transparent land acquisition processes, fair compensation mechanisms, and accessible grievance redress systems, to prevent legitimacy erosion (Babatunde et al., 2017; Zakhour, 2020). For implementing authorities and development partners, the results point to several priorities: (i) phased and diversified financing strategies with clear risk-sharing arrangements in public-private partnerships (Kumaraswamy & Zhang, 2001; Xiao & Lam, 2019); (ii) early and participatory land and livelihood planning supported by independent mediation (Winch et al., 2021); (iii) institutional arrangements that protect long-horizon programs from political turnover, such as statutory mandates, multi-party oversight, and regular public reporting (Priemus, 2010; Nepal & Jamasb, 2012); and (iv) streamlined inter-agency procedures that reduce administrative bottlenecks while preserving environmental and social safeguards (Kadefors, 1995; Locatelli et al., 2023). Together, these measures address the institutional conditions that most directly constrain SDG delivery.

Limitations

This study has limitations. It relies on a single case in one national and institutional setting, limiting statistical generalization (Yin, 2018). The empirical material primarily reflects perspectives of project-affiliated actors and official communications, with more limited direct input from affected communities, civil society organizations, and independent regulators, a constraint common in research on large-scale development interventions (Whyte & Mottee, 2022). In addition, RRUDP is a long-horizon intervention, and many SDG-related outcomes will only become observable over time; accordingly, the analysis focuses on alignment narratives and delivery constraints rather than verified long-term impacts (George et al., 2023). Finally, although triangulated with interviews and documents, publicly available multimedia materials may reflect strategic framing (Miles et al., 2014).

Future research directions

Future research could extend this work in several directions. First, comparative multi-case studies across Muslim-majority contexts, and across different religious or ethical traditions, could assess whether and how normative frameworks influence legitimacy, conflict, and SDG prioritization (Immler & Sakkers, 2022; Röell et al., 2024). Second, longitudinal research could trace how ethical framing, stakeholder coalitions, and governance arrangements evolve across project phases and political cycles (George et al., 2016; Sergeeva, 2024). Third, mixed-method studies could link project processes to measurable SDG indicators (e.g., water quality, biodiversity, livelihoods, displacement outcomes) to examine when normative alignment translates into material sustainability gains (Watkins et al., 2022; Bain et al., 2019). Finally,

further research could focus on specific governance mechanisms, such as grievance redress, benefit-sharing, transparency and anti-corruption safeguards, and inter-agency coordination routines, to identify which institutional designs most effectively support SDG-oriented interventions under conditions of volatility and uncertainty (Ebrahim et al., 2022; Locatelli et al., 2023).

Declarations

Clinical trial number

not applicable

Consent to publish:

Not applicable

Ethics statement

This study used documentary evidence and interview material collected for academic research purposes. The protocol was approved by Research Ethics Committee at Riphah International University. It is further certified that the study was conducted in accordance with the ethical standards laid down in the 1964 Declaration of Helsinki. The approval was granted on 10 July 2024 (Reference No.: Riphah/FMS/RSBM/ORIC/RG-24-01).

Informed consent

Participants were fully informed about the aims and procedures of the study, the voluntary nature of their participation, their right to withdraw at any time without any consequences and were assured that their identities and responses would remain anonymous and confidential. Informed consent was obtained from all participants before they participated in the study.

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Author Contribution

The first author prepared the initial draft of the manuscript, from the Literature Review through to the Conclusion. The third author contributed to writing the Introduction. The second author revised and

edited the manuscript. All authors reviewed and approved the final version of the manuscript for submission.

Data Availability

The datasets generated during and/or analyzed during the current study are not publicly available because the full dataset includes confidential interview material, sensitive documents, and materials governed by institutional ethics conditions but are available from the corresponding author on reasonable request.

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