**Time for Local Governments**

[Dr Abdur Rehman Cheema](https://dailytimes.com.pk/writer/dr-abdur-rehman-cheema/)

December 4, 2020

Localisation of Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) is how local and regional governments and other local governance actors can critically contribute towards the overall achievement of the SDGs. Local governments are ultimately judged on their ability to provide their citizens with quality basic services such as water, sanitation, health, education, waste management, and transport. Failure to provide the basic quality services has serious repercussions for human wellbeing, environmental sustainability, and economic development. A local or municipal revolution will in fact lead to achievement of SDGs. Local governments are willing and able to rise to the challenge of providing basic services, but they need the human, technical and, above all, the financial resources to do so. Moreover, basic service provision is best where empowered local governments have the authority, resources, and capacity to fulfil their responsibilities in service delivery. Challenges to establishing effective local governments must be overcome to guarantee universal access to quality basic services and to build an inclusive and environmentally sustainable future in which human dignity, economic development and social justice are enjoyed by all.

The Constitution of Pakistan requires meaningful devolution of political, administrative and financial powers to local governments under Article 37 and Article 140-A. However, in Pakistan, local governments have been struggling for meaningful political, administrative and financial devolution particularly in the aftermath of the 18 th Amendment to the Constitution of Pakistan in 2010. Though this amendment allowed greater autonomy to the provinces, the provinces have held control, marginalised local governments and retained authority to direct and oversee them.

The provinces would have to remove the critical impediments to the strengthening and empowering the last tier of governance, the union council

Though different amendments have been made to the local government acts by the respective provinces, local governments both in urban and rural areas remain deprived off political, administrative and financial autonomy to effectively discharge their functions. The local governments in each of the provinces differ in terms of their structure such as tenure, election
process and fiscal powers.

A range of functions such as public health, primary education, water supply, sanitation, town planning and building control have been devolved to different tiers in the local government system by the provinces. However, none of the local governments can levy a tax or incur debt without approval of the respective provincial government as per the prevailing laws governing local governments in the four provinces. Effective management of basic services requires closer cooperation between local authorities and other levels of government; improved vertical and horizontal coordination between local, regional, national, and international institutions is necessary. Effective multi-level governance requires institutional and legal frameworks that clearly define the roles and responsibilities of all levels of government, guided by the principle of subsidiarity.
The local governments formed across the country in 2014 and 2015 have completed their tenures. New elections have not been held yet. In lower middle countries such as Pakistan, gaps between required investment and current resources in basic services are the widest in rural areas.

At this point in time, the research institutions and policy think tanks should investigate the most pressing issues that restrict the local governments in both rural and urban areas to deliver basic services such as water, sanitation, health, education, waste management, and transport effectively at the grassroots level to men and women and help achieve SDGs, leaving no one behind. These services mainly and directly relate to SDG 4 (Quality Education), SDG 5 (Gender Equality), SDG 6 (Clean Water and Sanitation) and indirectly to other goals. Election Commission of Pakistan is well suited to share these questions with the academia, provide access to its administrative data and facilitate objective analysis of the recent experiences of local
governance.

Five years since Pakistan signed up for SDGs agenda and with ten years of action left, Pakistan needs to move fast and mobilise the largely untapped power of the people at the grassroots level.

The provinces would have to remove the critical impediments to the strengthening and empowering the last tier of governance, the union council. Also, provinces would need to analyse differential needs of local governance in urban and rural contexts. In the post 18 th amendment scenario, each of the provinces need to address the critical changes or reforms in the current dispensation of the local governance system in rural and urban areas that must be undertaken in order to enable the councillors to ensure the delivery of basic services leaving no one behind, help achieve SDGs and mitigate the COVID-19 sufferings. No adhoc measures by the government of Prime Minister Mr Imran Khan such as Tiger Force can substitute for effective local and legitimate leadership.

*Dr Abdur Rehman Cheema (arehmancheema@gmail.com) is an economist and development practitioner based in Islamabad. The views expressed are of the author only.*