

EXCLUSIVE INTERVIEW



ICMA: In what ways is UNDP's work in governance and institutional strengthening contributing to the development of human and social capital in Pakistan?

Samuel Rizk: Over the last five years, UNDP has invested over USD 100 million to build institutional capacity in Pakistan, leading to sustainable, professionalized investments in human and social capital within the public sector. We are implementing a large, diverse, multi-level governance portfolio in the country, focused on key areas such as the rule of law, institutional and policy reform, strengthening electoral and legislative processes, community stabilization, and cross-border governance, with human rights at the core.

Our institutional partnerships at the federal, provincial, and local levels are crucial to the success, sustainability, and impact of all our programs. We have consistently provided cross-cutting, holistic support to our public

sector partners through infrastructure, capacity building, and technical advisory for policy reform and implementation. The key objective is to ensure that institutions are capable and resilient and that staff turnover does not disrupt processes or hinder progress in reforms and innovation. Additionally, our efforts to expand civic space in the country offer a neutral platform where all stakeholders can collaborate on Pakistan's development and institutional growth.



Mr. Samuel Rizk

Resident Representative in Pakistan
United Nations Development Programme (UNDP)



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ICMA: What impact has UNDP's support for access to justice and rule of law had on social capital development?

Samuel Rizk: A key objective of our work has been to strengthen institutional capabilities for more efficient and effective information flow and resource management. Our work with law enforcement agencies and on strengthening access to justice and the rule of law at federal and provincial levels has led to systemic shifts in the adaptation of new technologies and work processes, as well as more inclusive and gender-sensitive work environments. With the support of our development partners, UNDP has made key infrastructure investments, including law enforcement training facilities in Quetta and Nowshera, the Prosecution Academy in Peshawar, model police stations in the merged districts, and women's hostels for the Anti-Narcotics Force, to create safe, accessible, and empowering environments for women where they can work effectively and without fear. Moreover, our work on access to justice, through the establishment of gender desks, community stabilization, and the provision of affordable legal aid and awareness, strengthens rights-based social protection mechanisms and accessibility at the provincial and district levels.

ICMA: How does improving government transparency and accountability contribute to human capital growth?

Samuel Rizk: With over 60% of its population under the age of 30, Pakistan has a tremendous opportunity to invest in and utilize this young human capital to drive economic, social, and institutional growth. However, there is an urgent need to incentivize the people of Pakistan to pursue economic opportunities in a safe and enabling environment. Achieving this is impossible without transparency and accountability.

Efficient resource allocation, job placement, business incentives, and dignified, predictable service delivery all require strong institutional mechanisms that are standardized for efficiency and effectiveness. These systems are key to building public trust in the government's ability and willingness to create inclusive opportunities for socio-economic progress. Without such institutions, reforms risk being short-lived or ineffective.

Moreover, in the post-COVID world marked by growing global polarization, we need policies, digital adaptation, and access to information that actively prevent corrupt practices, particularly considering their potential impact on community empowerment and both real and perceived inequality. Domestic and international investors will clearly benefit from such an enabling environment, where their investments will generate scalable and sustainable economic opportunities.

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ICMA: How is the Poverty Reduction and Inclusion Unit helping to build human capital in marginalized areas?

Samuel Rizk: UNDP has adopted a holistic approach to building human capital in marginalized areas of Pakistan, including some of the poorest regions of Balochistan and the Merged Districts (MDs) in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa. Our interventions initially focus on improving access to basic services such as health, education, and sanitation. These efforts are complemented by skill development programs, entrepreneurship training, and access to finance initiatives to facilitate gainful employment opportunities for local communities in often very challenging markets. Many of these initiatives are supported by our private sector partners through their corporate social responsibility portfolios.

We ensure that all our interventions in Pakistan are informed by local needs and responsive to broader socioeconomic developments. This includes post-crisis recovery in the aftermath of military operations in the NMDs, building institutional capacities to lead economic recovery following COVID-19, and targeted initiatives to promote youth-led social and economic development. Finally, all UNDP programming focuses on the social and economic empowerment of women, youth, persons with disabilities, and ethnic, religious, and gender minorities.

ICMA: How do UNDP's climate resilience projects contribute to building human capital in vulnerable regions?

Samuel Rizk: UNDP's climate resilience projects, including the Flood Recovery Programme (FRP), help build human capital in vulnerable regions by equipping communities with the tools and knowledge they need to cope with climate challenges. In Pakistan, UNDP's approach addresses both immediate and long-term needs, focusing on early recovery in a post-humanitarian phase as a bridge to swiftly return to development efforts.

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These projects emphasize sustainable practices, such as improved resource management and disaster preparedness, while promoting gender equality by ensuring that women have equal access to opportunities. By prioritizing environmental sustainability, digital inclusion, and climate resilience, UNDP’s work benefits entire communities, not just those in immediate need. This comprehensive approach empowers individuals to become more self-reliant, adaptable, and resilient in the face of future climate risks, contributing to broader development goals and ensuring a more sustainable future for all.

ICMA: What role does UNDP play in helping Pakistan achieve SDGs that directly improve human and social capital, like health and education?

Samuel Rizk: Pakistan faces serious challenges in human development. It is currently on track to achieve only 35 out of 169 Sustainable Development Goal (SDG) targets, clearly indicating the need for more targeted and accelerated interventions. To address this, UNDP has been working closely with the Government of Pakistan, exemplified by our National SDGs Plus Program, which aligns the next five years of Pakistan’s Public Sector Development Programme (PSDP) and Annual Development Plans (ADPs) with priority SDGs.

This time, our focus is on transformative governance, digitalization, and policy reforms, while ensuring that our development efforts are people-centered and aimed at reducing inequalities in underserved regions. We are also prioritizing innovative financing through partnerships with the private sector and ensuring that gender is mainstreamed across all our development efforts.

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education, we are constructing and rehabilitating educational institutions. Last year alone, UNDP collaborated with 22 schools in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa, contributing to a total of 898 schools rehabilitated in the province since 2015, benefiting more than 265,000 students, 65% of whom are girls.

Similar efforts are underway in Balochistan, where UNDP has repaired or renovated 43 schools and is preparing for similar work in 41 additional schools identified in coordination with the provincial government. Our initiatives enhance the quality of public sector service delivery and the learning environment for students by providing furniture and lab equipment in renovated institutions. Comparable support is extended to the health sector in Balochistan through the rehabilitation and repair of health facilities, alongside the provision of essential medical equipment in 15 health facilities, including Basic Health Units (BHUs) in four districts of the province. With support from the Global Fund, UNDP is installing Pressure Swing Absorption (PSA)-based oxygen plants in 36 public sector hospitals across Pakistan, enhancing their capacity to respond to emergency medical cases and potential future outbreaks like COVID-19.

UNDP is also the principal recipient of the Global Fund Grant for HIV prevention, treatment, and care services in Pakistan. We work closely with the Federal Ministry of Health, national and provincial AIDS control programs, and civil society organizations to deliver these services. These partnerships have significantly improved the government’s capacity to provide life-saving assistance to the most affected communities while empowering key population groups to guide prevention efforts through direct engagement with vulnerable communities. Through this project, UNDP is providing medicines and administrative support to 93 Antiretroviral Treatment centers across Pakistan. Furthermore, UNDP has improved the outreach of HIV prevention services in Pakistan by increasing the number of prevention service sites from 19 to 53, reaching over 310,000 beneficiaries from key population groups since the project commenced in 2021.

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ICMA: How is UNDP's circular economy project creating jobs and building local skills?

Samuel Rizk: UNDP's commitment to advancing an inclusive circular economy in Pakistan is essential for addressing urgent environmental challenges while promoting equitable economic growth. Our approach aims to shift towards a systemic framework that embraces experimentation, innovation, and the interconnectedness of solutions.

Several important considerations guide UNDP's efforts. One of these is improving resource efficiency and sustainability in partnership with the private sector. Circular economy projects encourage innovation in recycling and sustainable production, helping individuals and SMEs develop new business models and leverage waste as a resource for entrepreneurship and resilience. We follow a user-centered approach in development by bringing innovators, designers, and environmentalists together in a maker space to experiment with waste and give it a second life. Our engagement includes various stakeholders, such as companies and start-ups that upcycle waste into synthetic lumber. In partnership with Unilever, UNDP led an extensive exercise to map the plastic waste system in Pakistan. Another example is our collaboration with Coca-Cola, where we worked on Pakistan's first 1 km plastic road project, utilizing plastic waste in road construction. This initiative helps reduce environmental impact while promoting sustainable infrastructure.

We also have locally based initiatives that empower communities through capacity building in green jobs, kitchen gardening, and digital skills, increasing local employment opportunities and promoting sustainable livelihoods. In a country where women, despite

representing 48% of the total population, have a workforce participation rate of only 20%, empowering women and girls and facilitating their access to the job market is extraordinarily important. Advancing gender equality is not just an ethical mandate but a vital economic strategy, with the potential to add US\$ 91.5 billion annually to the economy, according to the IMF. In all our initiatives, we therefore focus strongly on youth and gender inclusiveness.

Our projects offer vocational training in green industries like renewable energy, ensuring long-term employment opportunities and a skilled workforce for the future. By prioritizing marginalized groups, including women, the circular economy initiatives ensure equal access to training and job opportunities. In Gilgit-Baltistan, 15 green business centers are actively training over 350 women to promote green jobs. These women are not only crafting biodegradable bags to mitigate the plastic waste crisis but are also emerging as influential advocates for climate action within their communities.

ICMA: How can UNDP and ICMA collaborate to develop human capital, particularly through joint training initiatives?

Samuel Rizk: I believe Pakistan's wealth primarily derives from its people: resilient, skilled, educated, and entrepreneurial. No investment will go to waste if it focuses on preparing the people of Pakistan for the future. To achieve this, UNDP is collaborating with government institutions, civil society, and private sector actors to implement skills development programs that particularly target young people. These initiatives go beyond the traditional focus on low-skilled work by incorporating essential digital skills to prepare youth for future markets.

Together, UNDP and ICMAP can explore further opportunities to enhance human capital in Pakistan, particularly by focusing on future skills relevant to building and sustaining small businesses, the digital economy, e-commerce, service sector jobs, finance and accounting, legal drafting, and translation, along with personal development for professional growth.

I can also envision a collaboration on financial literacy and management, especially for women entrepreneurs in remote areas. Such initiatives could be instrumental in empowering small business owners to effectively manage their enterprises, scale up, and access new markets, including online platforms. A promising starting point for this collaboration could be UNDP's upcoming initiatives in the 20 most vulnerable districts of Pakistan, which aim to facilitate poverty alleviation, women's empowerment, and the expansion of digital livelihoods.

The Editorial Board thanks Mr. Samuel Rizk, Resident Representative in Pakistan, United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) for sparing from his precious time to give exclusive interview for Chartered Management Accountant Journal.