

Strategic Communication and Civic Diplomacy for Pakistan's Development Future: A Conceptual Framework for Embedding SIFC within UN SDG's

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Abstract

In an era of global resource management, human security, and planetary security dimensions, the UN SDG's and climate requirements are constituting the global benchmarks for the legitimacy of investment governance. While the success of renewable resources depends on maintaining ecological integrity and promoting social equity. This paper presents a theoretical analysis and through a synthesis of existing literature and utilising the context of policy coherence for sustainable development, strategic communication concept, and public diplomacy scholarship. The analysis reveals that civic diplomacy is essential component surrounding investment advancement in success of governance of an organisation, i.e., a facilitative body. A critical gap is identified between the potential of diplomacy and UN SDGs as creative enabler for "Investment diplomacy" and its application within SIFC framework. The paper concludes by proposing a framework for bridging this gap, emphasising the need for reconceptualising investment governance in an era of sustainable futures, hence, sheds light regarding how Pakistan's investment diplomacy may employ "citizen communication" as an instrument of civic diplomacy and a source of legitimacy by using "Network Inspired - SDG Nexus" model presented in this paper. Hence, SIFC's effectiveness is likely to be judged not only by the volume of capital inflows it attracts but also by the credibility of investment narrative it constructs around country's sustainable investment future, its strategic role, and its contribution to global economy.

Keywords

Human Security, Planetary Security, Sustainable Development, Public

Diplomacy, UN SDGs, Investment Governance, SIFC Pakistan, Strategic Communication, Public Governance

1. Investment Facilitation in Pakistan

Country's investment facilitation landscape has been shaped by series of evolving administrative configuration and since 2000 despite ideological variation, successive governments in Pakistan have introduced various administrative reforms aimed at improving governance effectiveness. However, investment facilitation has continued to be influenced by institutional fragmentation, policy inconsistency, variable bureaucratic capacity constraints, politicisation of development and constrained inter-institutional coordination.

Such arrangements consist of the "Board of Investment (BOI)", Vision 2025 framework, "URAAAN Pakistan 5E framework (2024-2029) (Planning Commission of Pakistan, 2024), EODB, NIS, "China-Pakistan Economic Corridor" (CPEC) joint cooperation committee outlines a comprehensive action plan for deepening bilateral cooperation across political, economic, and infrastructural domains (China-Pakistan Economic Corridor, 2025). Each of this mechanism/policy promised to simplify investment procedures aiming to boost investor confidence on Pakistan's economy. However, recurring politicisation geo-political instability, governance deficiencies, limited their impact on national economic development of the country.

Launched in June 2023, the Special Investment Facilitation Council (SIFC) was established to address longstanding challenges in Pakistan's economic governance. Conceived as a "one-window" platform, it brings together the federal government, provincial administrations, and the military under a unified institutional framework headed by the Prime Minister of Pakistan (National Assembly of Pakistan, 2023). The Council aims to expedite investment proposals by facilitating timely decision-making and reducing bureaucratic and administrative barriers, thereby attracting foreign direct investment (FDI) in priority sectors such as information technology, mining, energy, agriculture, and civil infrastructure development.

Unlike previous investment facilitation arrangements, the SIFC explicitly institutionalises military participation in economic and investment-related decision-making. Its apex committee comprises civilian policymakers alongside senior military officials, reflecting an effort to integrate administrative authority with security governance functions; such as oversight, enforcement, and coordination to address implementation bottlenecks. This multi-layered governance arrangement is presented as a mechanism for enhancing efficiency, improving project security, strengthening transparency and accountability, and signalling political stability to foreign investors.

2. Introduction

The economic development of Pakistan has traditionally been constrained by

structural fragility and foreign dependence. Persistent fiscal deficits, complex, disorganised, inconsistent policies and commitments, ineffective regulations have substantially damaged and undermined investor/s confidence (Haque, 2017; Khan, 2020). In addition to this, these challenges are amplified by climate vulnerability and demographic pressures which intensify the urgency of attracting external capital (Mustafa & Wrathall, 2011). Although successive governments have attempted to experiment with institutional reforms to attract foreign investment, however, results have remained very limited/modest due to weak coordination and inconsistent investment governance.

The establishment of SIFC (Special Investment Facilitation Council) in 2023 is another latest effort aimed to address these challenging issues. SIFC is framed as centralised “Single-Window” mechanism to overcome bureaucratic silos and hence, expedite investor-engaging processes, yet institutional efficiency alone is insufficient. In the modern-day global political economy where sustainability imperatives and normative frameworks shape flows of finance, the legitimacy of institutions rests equally on their communicative practices (Hallahan et al., 2007; Zaharna, 2022).

Pakistan’s experience with the 2022 and 2025 floods underscores the centrality of communication for credibility (United Nations, 2025; United Nations Pakistan, 2025). The disaster displaced millions and caused losses exceeding \$30 billion USD (World Bank, 2025). Similarly, (Sovacool et al., 2022) highlighted a policy stance centred on reducing poverty, building resilience, and protecting vulnerable groups has been highlighted [ibid], i.e. youth cohort of 15 - 29, economically disadvantaged citizens/regions, e.g., districts/cities. Pakistan encountered difficulties to acquire resources, i.e., monetary assistance due to persistent perceptions of governance risks, inconsistent and conflicting policies, and ineffective communication strategies. Even though it was normatively entitled to climate finance under international climate justice frameworks (Sovacool et al., 2022). This reinforces scholar’s claim that asserts: legitimacy and public trust can be achieved through coherent narratives that establish national priorities rather than just vulnerabilities (Cull, 2009; Nye, 2004).

Considering this, the SIFC can be viewed as a communicative platform as well as a bureaucratic reform mechanism, whose effectiveness depends on how convincingly it projects investment governance as transparent, inclusive, and aligned with the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). The SDGs provide a shared policy framework for states, investors, and society to align development priorities and expectations (Sachs, 2015). Situating investment initiatives within this framework has the potential to recalibrate prevailing perceptions of Pakistan from a fragile and unstable state to a credible partner in sustainable development.

The study theoretically situates SIFC at the intersection of three interconnected strands of literature. First, strategic communication scholarship emphasizes that organizational legitimacy is shaped not merely through information dissemination but through the structuring of priorities, narratives, and policy signals (Hallahan et al., 2007). Second, public diplomacy literature highlights the relational and advo-

cacy-based dimensions of global communication through which credibility, trust, and authority are cultivated, drawing on the core elements of soft power (Nye, 2004; Cull, 2009; Zaharna, 2022). Third, the principle of policy coherence for sustainable development underscores the need to align sectoral policies and narratives with the SDG framework to avoid fragmentation and enhance institutional legitimacy (OECD, 2019). Despite their relevance, these perspectives remain largely underexplored in the context of investment facilitation in developing states such as Pakistan.

Against this backdrop, the paper asks how SIFC can develop communication strategies that signal sustainability, coherence, and transparency, and how SDG-aligned discourse may contribute to strengthening investor trust. By addressing this gap, the study advances scholarly debate on the role of strategic communication and public diplomacy in investment governance, with particular reference to Pakistan's pursuit of sustainable development.

2.1. Methodological Approach

This study adopts a conceptual and qualitative interpretive (Saunders et al., 2023) methodological approach, informed by document analysis and media discourse review, to examine communication gaps within Pakistan's Special Investment Facilitation Council (SIFC). The research does not seek to test causal relationships or measure communication outcomes empirically; rather, it aims to develop an integrative analytical framework that links strategic communication, public diplomacy, and policy coherence with the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) in the context of investment governance.

The analysis draws on publicly available primary documents, including official SIFC notifications, policy statements, government briefings, speeches, and strategic communications related to investment facilitation and economic reform. These materials are complemented by secondary sources, such as national and international media coverage, policy briefs, institutional reports, and commentary produced by development partners and economic stakeholders. Collectively, these sources provide insight into how SIFC's investment narrative is articulated, framed, and publicly projected.

Using a qualitative interpretive lens, the study examines the discursive alignment between SIFC's communication practices and principles of sustainability, transparency, and policy coherence embedded within the SDG framework. This approach is particularly appropriate for governance-oriented inquiry and theory building (Yin, 2018), where the objective is to assess narrative structures, legitimacy claims, and communicative positioning rather than to generate generalizable empirical findings. By grounding the conceptual framework in systematic analysis of real policy and communication materials, the study strengthens the analytical validity of its theoretical assertions.

2.2. Theoretical and Conceptual Framework

It is necessary to ground analysis in interconnected body of theory in order to

fully understand how Pakistan's (SIFC) Special Investment Facilitation Council can effectively convey its green investment programme A) Strategic Communication, B) Public Diplomacy, C) Policy Coherence for Sustainable Development, and D) United Nations Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). This study offers conceptual framework based on existing research to assess how communication functions as a crucial component for institutional legitimacy, soft power, and policy coherence?

Drawing on a qualitative review (Saunders et al., 2023; Yin, 2018) of publically available policy documents and media discourse, this analysis examines how sustainability is communicated within Pakistan's contemporary investment governance framework. Key documents reviewed include the Prime Minister's Economic Transformation Plan (Government of Pakistan, 2024), the National Assembly-notified legal framework (National Assembly of Pakistan, 2023) establishing the Special Investment Facilitation Council in 2023, and publicly available SIFC policy statements. While official communications consistently prioritize procedural efficiency, regulatory streamlining, and investor facilitation (Government of Pakistan, 2024; National Assembly of Pakistan, 2023) the GoP, 2023 references to sustainability and explicit alignment with the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) remain largely aspirational or implicit. International investment monitoring bodies (UNCTAD, 2023) and media coverage similarly frame SIFC as a centralized "single-window" mechanism designed to accelerate foreign investment, with comparatively limited attention to environmental or social governance commitments (Dawn, 2025; Reuters, 2025). This communicative orientation provides an appropriate analytical context for applying strategic communication theories particularly systems thinking, framing, and agenda-building to assess how SIFC's investment narrative could be recalibrated to enhance legitimacy, trust, and policy coherence.

2.3. Systems Theory

Strategic communication literature emphasizes that communication is not merely a process of transmitting information, but a social practice that shapes perceptions, legitimizes institutions, and enables collective action. Strategic communication has been defined as the purposeful use of communication by an organization to fulfil its mission (Grunig & Hunt, 1984; Materynska & Konopatska, 2025). It extends beyond media and public relations activities to include the ways in which organizations manage stakeholder relationships, formulate policies, and construct institutional legitimacy. In this context, three theoretical strands are particularly relevant for analysing SIFC's communication practices: (a) systems theory, (b) framing, and (c) agenda-setting.

From a systems perspective, communication is understood as dynamic, interconnected, and embedded within broader institutional and social environments. Organizational communication theory conceptualizes institutions as open systems that continuously interact with their external environments (Mesaroş &

Tănăsescu, 2021). This ecological view foregrounds sense-making processes, feedback loops, and multi-level interactions that structure how communication flows between sub-systems, including departments, stakeholders, and the wider public. Accordingly, communication is not a one-way dissemination of information but a dialogical and adaptive process through which organizations interpret environmental signals, adjust their strategies, and sustain legitimacy (Nowacki, 2019; Weber, 2024). By integrating inputs from both internal and external constituencies, organizations such as SIFC can navigate complex regulatory and social landscapes, reduce misalignment risks, and strengthen legitimacy when strategic intent remains aligned with stakeholder expectations.

2.3.1. Investment-Framing

Framing perspective reveals that communication involves selecting particular characteristics or specific elements of observed reality to highlight thereby, influencing recipients perceptions. This process includes identifying the problems, evaluating root-causes, moral assessment and recommending solutions. Recent theoretical applications have demonstrated its significant influence on public opinion various fields, such as; political messaging (Ciurel, 2023) media portrayal of conflicts (Setialaksana et al., 2025), non-profit engagement build trust through moral narratives and validate authority (Stephen, 2022).

In this regard, it is extremely important for organisation like the SIFC to formulate and illustrate an investment narrative. For instance: investor/s who care about the “green environment”, “human/community development”, “creating employment opportunities”, etc., are likely to support SIFC initiatives, objectives if it positions its narrative in promoting global sustainability through a green growth framework aligned with the UN Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). This perspective is well aligned with the findings of (Materynska & Konopatska, 2025) showcasing that attitudes and message framing have a major impact on trust in crises communication. On the other hand, presenting the investment project as merely an extractive or technological commercial endeavour can turn away international investors concerned with moral and environmental issues.

In the realm of politics, and as highlighted by Ciurel, 2023 and Stephen, 2022 framing choices have the potential to either polarize as well as unite the audience/citizens/followers or participants. Hence, the way SIFC communicates is more than matter of language; it constitutes a calculated strategic approach to engage with stakeholders that influences perception of legitimacy, intent and long-term value for its service users and citizens.

2.3.2. Agenda-Building Discourse

The perspective on agenda-building advances agenda-setting framework which highlights how organisations, policy-makers, and interest groups can shape public and media agendas about issues that worth importance (Darkwa et al., 2023). Agenda building focuses on what and who is involved in framing and prioritising matters within public discourse, whereas; agenda-setting concentrates on what

subjects are covered by the media. For strategic initiatives like the SIFC, which aims to situate Pakistan in the global sustainability narrative the theoretical perspective of agenda building is especially relevant. As noted by early scholarship that institutional actors actively decide on which policy topics should be highlighted rather than being merely passive consumers of information.

Research indicates that countries that use agenda-building techniques through diplomatic communications and media engagement are more successful in gaining credibility in global forums (Han, 2025; Almakaty, 2025). Thus, communication is more than supplementary function and a crucial instrument for agenda-discourse required to attract and influence stakeholder perceptions (Barıtçı, 2023; McCombs & Shaw, 1972; Ning & Wong, 2024). However, shift demands the development of an effective communication strategy that aligns with UN 2030 SDGs and coherently integrates into international climate financing standards and debates, highlighting Pakistan's evolutionary shift to sustainable development.

2.3.3. Balancing Local and Global Legitimacy of SIFC-Public Diplomacy

Public relational diplomacy situates communication in the global context of soft power and aims to enhance transnational/multi-national legitimacy, whereas, strategic communication places a strong emphasis on prioritising stakeholder interaction as well as on purpose of an organisation. The concept has evolved significantly, moving from a cold-war paradigm of information campaigns to a contemporary understanding of relational, networked, and collaborative practices (Dearing & Rogers, 1996; Çiçek, 2022).

(Cull, 2009) outlines five core elements of public diplomacy: listening, advocacy, cultural diplomacy, exchange diplomacy, and international broadcasting. For SIFC, *listening* is especially critical, as credibility in climate finance requires showing responsiveness to both investors and local communities. *Advocacy* and *broadcasting* are necessary for projecting Pakistan's investment narrative internationally, but unless they are grounded in authentic dialogue and transparent data related to investment in local community and human development can dismiss investor's concerns.

(Nye, 2004) The concept of soft power highlights that credibility and method/s of appeal are more influential than coercion in international relations, as whenever policies are aligned with globally shared values, beliefs and standards states gradually develop their soft power. The SDGs offer Pakistan exactly such a framework of values, norms, and standards. In order to counterbalance negative accusations and perceptions of instability or authoritarianism, SIFC can transform investment facilitation into a source of national soft power by framing its 'investment governance' as contribution to inclusive institutions (SDG 16), affordable energy (SDG 7), and global climate action (SDG 13).

(Zaharna, 2022) challenges one-way public diplomacy paradigms and promotes *relational public diplomacy* that establishes trust via collaboration, mutual understanding, and networked engagement. In practice, this implies that SIFC's diplomacy should involve climate initiatives, diaspora networks, and enrich its social

capital by diversifying its approaches with the support of Gulf and International financial institutes. Therefore, credibility of Pakistan's green investment growth strategy will depend on the extent to which it is viewed as integrated into broader relational networks than as a top-down mandate.

In a similar vein, (Melissen, 2005) stresses that new public diplomacy is defined by mutuality, multi-level governance, diversity, acceptance, and inclusion (Ali, 2025; Ralli & Binotto, 2025; Naeem & Iqbal, 2025; Mirza, 2025a). Hence, this paper argues that conventional state-to-state mechanisms are not enough for investment diplomacy in the twenty-first century rather it should function at multiple tiers including national, provincial, local, and transnational linking official policy with grass root legitimacy (Mirza, 2025). Collectively, these perspectives highlight that SIFC legitimacy will depend on its capacity to establish relational trust, connecting investment with common values, and exhibit responsiveness across networks rather merely performing marketing activities.

2.3.4. Policy Coherence for Sustainable Development (PCSD)

The third conceptual part of framework is policy coherence for sustainable development articulated in 2030 agenda (Fukuda-Parr & McNeill, 2019) defined methodical advancement of policies that re-inforce each other across sectors while addressing trade-offs and considering global/regional/local inter-generational impacts. Researchers (Waheed & Fischer, 2025) emphasise that policy coherence denotes cross-sectoral alignment and mutual reinforcement among policies, ensuring consistency across socio-economic and ecological domains. Misaligned or conflicting policies weaken coordination and obstruct sustainable development outcomes. So, nations should adopt mechanisms to achieve policy integration including strategic planning instruments and systematically apply policy coherence framework in the formulation of laws, regulations, policies, and strategic plans.

Considering communication perspective, PCSD emphasise on two insights. Firstly, coherence needs to be established both discursively in (how narrative depict alignment) and substantially (in the design of policies). As credibility for investment appeal may become weak for instance; if coal energy policy fosters the import of coal while climate policy encourages the increase of renewable energy sources. Secondly, PCSD strongly emphasise on the need for collaboration across governance tiers, e.g., federal, provincial and local tiers of government in order to prevent the perception of fragmentation, contradiction or incoherent activities. For SIFC this implies that while building communication strategies it should demonstrate how provincial and local programs are aligned with national SDG framework that lead to development change at local tier of governance.

Additionally, PCSD also offers methods, techniques and strategies for identifying spill-overs for example; how large scale agricultural investments facilitated by SIFC may affect biodiversity, land rights, and water availability? These spill-overs will result in negative PR, reputational problems and accusation of green-washing, if these are not recognised and communicated within internal or external constituents. Thus, communication evolves into a tool of coherence by presenting trade-

offs, mitigating strategies, techniques, and coordination mechanisms, and for SIFC it can demonstrate that it is operating within the principles of sustainable development by candidly outlining trade-offs, mitigation and coordination procedures.

2.3.5. SDGs as Normative Framework

Lastly, SDGs serve as global normative framework that influences legitimacy and credibility of “investment governance”. The SDGs constitute a “shared policy language” that facilitates cooperation among states, institutions, and sectors. They serve as benchmarks for both domestic growth and international development (Waheed & Fischer, 2025).

In context of SIFC, it can situate Pakistan economic recovery within the international context of sustainable development by aligning investment narratives with specific SDG targets e.g. 7.2: renewable energy share, 8.5: decent employment, 9.4: sustainable infrastructure, 13.2: climate strategies, 16.6: accountable institutions. By doing this, Pakistan is reframed as a key contributor/participant in achieving/delivering global development agenda of 2030, rather than a passive recipient of international aid. Furthermore, multilateral banks, sovereign wealth funds, and institutional investors increasingly evaluate projects under ESG and SDGs criteria and hence, SDGs alignment can improve access to climate financing.

Sustainable development academics strongly emphasise that without quantifiable indicators, open data and independent verifications the SDGs are vulnerable to being at risk of rhetorical devices merely and require more than symbolic solicitation (Tichenor et al., 2022; Lyytimäki et al., 2023). For SIFC, it indicates communication strategies need to identify trade-offs, disclose reliable measurements, and map investment outcomes to specific indicators in addition to usage of SDGs.

Additionally, SDGs also offer a normative buffer against reputational damage as explicit alignment with SDGs principles (inclusivity, accountability, and sustainability) might assist in context required to reframe narratives, towards legitimacy, in situations where land-use reforms draw criticism from civil society or when military engagement in economic governance could establish concerns.

3. Conceptual Framework

This study proposes a conceptual model for the SIFC by combining theoretical framework hence, model is summarised as follows:

- 1) **Strategic Communication:** emphasises how crucial agenda-setting, dialogical processes, and framing are to institutional legitimacy.
- 2) **Public Diplomacy:** emphasises that the credibility is based on more than just information sharing, and depends on relational trust, shared values, and soft power.
- 3) **Policy Coherence for Sustainable Development:** demonstrates that communication needs to address trade-offs, spill overs, while presenting a cohesive, transparent, narrative across sectors.

4) The SDGs: offers normative narrative that will allow SIFC to present investment facilitation initiative as legitimate contribution to globally common objectives.

Collectively, these perspectives imply that communication is a crucial component for SIFC’s policy success rather than a secondary concern. As in recent years the narrative alignment with sustainability norms are more important for gaining credibility in the global investment governance than actual volume of capital raised. This implies for Pakistan’s SIFC that the investment initiatives need to be framed as a contribution to the “Global Sustainable Development”. Whereas **Figure 1** presents an integrative governance and communication framework that situates Pakistan’s Special Investment Facilitation Council (SIFC) within the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals (UN SDGs) as a normative and strategic anchor for investment governance, policy coherence, and development outcomes.

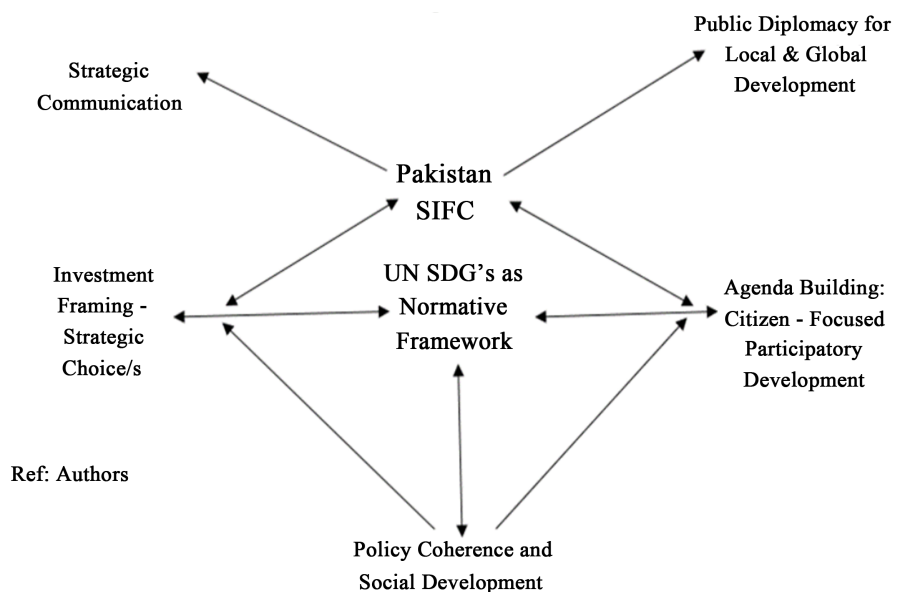


Figure 1. SIFC-SDG communication Nexus (Author-Compilation).

Figure 1 presents a conceptual governance framework that positions the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals (UN SDGs) as a normative anchor shaping Pakistan’s investment governance through the Special Investment Facilitation Council (SIFC). The diagram illustrates a multi-directional and relational model rather than a linear policy process, highlighting how global norms, national institutions, and societal actors interact in shaping development outcomes.

At the centre of the framework lies “UN SDGs as a Normative Framework”, indicating that the SDGs function not merely as aspirational commitments but as an active reference point guiding strategic choices, policy alignment, and governance priorities. The bidirectional arrows between the SDGs and other components signify feedback loops, where normative goals both inform and are reinforced by institutional practice.

Pakistan’s SIFC is positioned as the principal coordinating and translating in-

stitution. It acts as an intermediary that converts SDG-based global development norms into national investment strategies, regulatory coordination, and institutional signalling. The two-way relationship between SIFC and the SDG framework reflects mutual reinforcement: SDGs shape SIFC's strategic orientation, while SIFC operationalises SDG alignment within Pakistan's investment ecosystem.

The upper left component, Strategic Communication, highlights SIFC's role in constructing and projecting a coherent national development narrative. This narrative frames Pakistan's investment environment in terms of sustainability, policy stability, and global responsibility, thereby enhancing credibility among investors, development partners, and multilateral institutions.

On the upper right, Public Diplomacy for Local and Global Development extends this narrative externally. It demonstrates how SDG-aligned investment governance strengthens Pakistan's international legitimacy while simultaneously reinforcing domestic development commitments. The directional arrows indicate that public diplomacy both draws legitimacy from SDG alignment and feeds back into national governance strategies.

The left-hand node, Investment Framing Strategic Choices, illustrates how SDG norms influence sectoral prioritisation, risk assessment, and long-term investment decisions. This element underscores that investment choices are not purely market-driven but are increasingly shaped by normative considerations such as inclusivity, resilience, and environmental sustainability.

At the bottom of the framework, Policy Coherence and Social Development emphasises horizontal and vertical integration across government institutions. The bidirectional linkage with the SDG framework suggests that coherent policies enhance social development outcomes, while social development imperatives reinforce the relevance of SDGs in national planning and investment governance.

Finally, on the right-hand side, Agenda-Building: Citizen-Focused Participatory Development captures the participatory dimension of the model. This component reflects a shift from elite-centric investment promotion toward inclusive agenda-setting, where citizens, local communities, and sub-national actors influence development priorities. The reciprocal arrows indicate continuous feedback between citizens, SDG norms, and SIFC-led investment agendas.

4. Analysis and Discussion

Systems Theory and the Centralisation of SIFC Communication

Building on patterns observable in publicly available SIFC communications and associated media discourse, a discursive imbalance between advocacy, campaigning, and participation can be identified when these practices are examined through the lens of systems theory (Materynska & Konopatska, 2025). From this perspective, SIFC's communication architecture appears to be largely centralized and oriented toward procedural efficiency, regulatory streamlining, and expedited investment facilitation. Official communications frequently foreground institutional coordination, fast-tracking mechanisms, and approval processes, while of-

fering comparatively limited insight into feedback loops, adaptive learning processes, or structured participatory engagement with service users and stakeholders.

This orientation is particularly visible in initiatives such as the *Green Pakistan Initiative (GPI)*, where official narratives emphasize investment opportunity creation and efficiency gains. At the same time, these communications provide limited publicly visible evidence of structured engagement with small and medium-scale farmers, environmental stakeholders, or local communities within designated project regions. From a systems-theoretical standpoint (Grunig & Hunt, 1984; Mesaroş & Tănăsescu, 2021; Nowacki, 2019; Weber, 2024), legitimacy is understood to emerge not only from efficiency but also from open, dialogical interaction and continuous feedback. The relative absence of reciprocal communication may therefore constrain institutional responsiveness, particularly in contexts characterized by social transformation or environmental risk (Waheed & Fischer, 2025). Importantly, this pattern does not necessarily indicate communicative failure; rather, it reflects a system design that privileges coordination and speed over participatory adaptability.

4.1. Framing Analysis: Sustainability as an Aspirational Narrative

Framing theory offers further insight into how SIFC communicates its investment priorities. Across official statements, website content, and public-facing narratives, SIFC frequently invokes themes of partnership, opportunity, and strategic alignment with stakeholders, i.e., foreign investors (Ciurel, 2023; Ning & Wong, 2024; Setialaksana et al., 2025). However, these narratives are less frequently articulated through a diagnostic or prognostic sustainability frame that explicitly links investment initiatives to the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), climate adaptation strategies, or environmental, social, and governance (ESG) standards.

From a framing perspective, such selective emphasis foregrounds positive associations such as growth, opportunity, and stability while leaving sustainability trade-offs and governance commitments comparatively under-specified. As a result, sustainability tends to function as an aspirational or symbolic frame, enhancing communicative appeal without being consistently operationalized through measurable indicators, timelines, or policy benchmarks. In an international investment environment increasingly attentive to evidence-based sustainability commitments, this framing approach may invite perceptions of rhetorical overreach or narrative imbalance. Rather than implying deliberate misrepresentation, this pattern appears to reflect the predominance of promotional framing over sustainability-integrated narrative construction.

4.2. Agenda-Building and Transactional Investment Discourse

Agenda-building theory (Darkwa et al., 2023) helps to explain how SIFC has been effective in shaping national discourse around investment facilitation while simultaneously circumscribing the strategic breadth of that discourse. Through coor-

dinated messaging and high-level institutional endorsement, SIFC has elevated investment facilitation, policy certainty, and bilateral cooperation within Pakistan's economic agenda. Media coverage has reinforced this emphasis by portraying SIFC as a centralized "single-window" mechanism designed to accelerate capital inflows and signal regulatory stability.

At the same time, the agenda advanced through these communicative practices remains largely transactional in orientation. It places primary emphasis on bilateral partnerships, sector-specific deals, and capital mobilization, while offering more limited linkage to Pakistan's stated commitments to climate resilience, inclusive development (Han, 2025) or citizen participation (Naeem & Iqbal, 2025). In an international policy environment increasingly shaped by climate finance, sustainability reporting, and development accountability, this constrained agenda framing may limit opportunities to align investment promotion with global sustainability discourse and longer-term legitimacy-building.

4.3. Interconnected Communication Gaps and Institutional Implications

When considered collectively, three interconnected gaps become apparent within SIFC's communication architecture. First, a trust-related gap appears to persist among local and regional stakeholders particularly marginalized groups (Mirza, 2025) such as unemployed youth (18 - 35) linked to limited participatory and development-oriented communication. Second, the absence of explicit SDG-based framing reduces narrative coherence and constrains the international legibility of Pakistan's investment strategy (Lyytimäki et al., 2023; Tichenor et al., 2022). Third, a deficit in agenda integration limits the alignment of investment promotion with global sustainability and climate governance narratives. These gaps appear mutually reinforcing, contributing to communication practices that may be perceived as less adaptive, less accessible, and insufficiently participatory.

Addressing these constraints does not necessitate abandoning investment advocacy. Rather, it suggests the potential value of recalibrating SIFC's communication strategy from a predominantly promotional posture toward a more strategic and institutionalized model of engagement. Embedding interactive mechanisms that connect local district-level stakeholders with national and international investment narratives could enhance transparency, responsiveness, and trust over time.

4.4. Public Diplomacy, Relational Engagement, and Soft Power

Within the contemporary international context, public diplomacy has evolved beyond traditional government-to-government engagement to encompass networks of private investors, academic institutions, development organizations, and transnational actors. For SIFC, attracting investment in projects related to global resources is closely intertwined with challenges of national legitimacy, policy con-

sistency, and normative alignment with international development priorities. Public diplomacy therefore constitutes a key instrument through which SIFC can communicate policy intent and project Pakistan as a credible, accountable, and reform-oriented state.

Relational public diplomacy emphasizes communication grounded in mutual-ity, network creation, and co-production (Darkwa et al., 2023). In contrast, SIFC's international outreach currently appears to rely primarily on event-based engagement, centered on high-profile bilateral interactions particularly with Gulf States and framed through narratives of "mutual partnerships". While such approaches may generate short-term diplomatic visibility, they are less well suited to fostering long-term trust or demonstrating alignment with widely shared global values. Integrating relational and connective diplomacy could enable SIFC to move beyond transactional engagement toward more sustained credibility (Mirza, 2025c).

As relational diplomacy theory suggests, credibility emerges through co-created communication networks (Zaharna, 2022). In the context of SIFC, this implies engaging affected communities and stakeholders not merely as audiences, but as active participants in shaping Pakistan's investment narrative. Such engagement may contribute to relational credibility and strengthen soft power by grounding investment governance in trust, transparency, and shared value creation.

Soft power theory further underscores that credibility, institutional reliability, and sustainability commitments increasingly outweigh material resource endowments in shaping global investment attractiveness (Nye, 2004). States that demonstrate policy consistency, ethical governance, and inclusive communication practices tend to enjoy a "credibility premium" among international investors. Accordingly, effective public diplomacy extends beyond the signing of memoranda of understanding to demonstrating that investment policies reflect accountability, environmental stewardship, and social inclusion values that international partners increasingly prioritize (Cull, 2009).

Comparative experiences from the United Arab Emirates (MASDAR, IRENA, COP28), Saudi Arabia's Green Initiative, the European Green Deal (including REPowerEU), and the United Kingdom's Sustainable Farming Incentives illustrate how communication grounded in measurable sustainability commitments can enhance diplomatic standing and attract climate-conscious investment. For SIFC, a comparable approach would involve explicitly linking communication infrastructure to Pakistan's NDCs, SDGs, and climate adaptation plans. Positioning national investment portfolios as evidence-based contributions to these commitments could transform diplomatic messaging from aspirational to demonstrable. Participation in multilateral forums including SDG platforms, climate finance dialogues, and COP processes would further situate SIFC within the international community of practice advancing sustainable development.

Ultimately, in the SDG era, investment attraction depends less on rhetorical positioning than on credible alignment with shared local and global norms. Integrating principles of strategic communication, public diplomacy, and soft power

within SIFC's communication strategy offers a pathway toward sustained legitimacy. A reciprocal global-to-local (G-local) participation model may enable SIFC to function as a platform that substantively reflects Pakistan's contribution to global sustainable development while advancing national economic objectives.

5. Conclusion and Practical Implications

In conclusion, this study presents a connective governance model that conceptualizes the Special Investment Facilitation Council (SIFC) not merely as a centralized investment coordination body, but as a relational platform embedded within a wider governance ecosystem.

Drawing on strategic communication, public diplomacy, and policy coherence for sustainable development (PCSD), the model illustrates how investment legitimacy and effectiveness emerge through interactions among state institutions, investors, service users and local communities, and transnational stakeholders. By situating SIFC's investment facilitation within a connective architecture aligned with the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), the study reframes investment governance as a communicative and connective process, where coordination, credibility, and sustainability are co-produced across sectors and governance levels.

Sectoral Priorities & Global Resource Management

Based on SIFC identified sectors as important areas of investment facilitation, each of these intersects with Pakistan's sustainable development challenges.

Energy Transition: From Supply Security to Climate Credibility (SDG 7, SDG 13)

Pakistan's economic growth has long been constrained by structural weaknesses in the energy sector, including circular debt, reliance on imported fossil fuels, and limited renewable energy penetration. In response, the Special Investment Facilitation Council (SIFC) has prioritized modernization of transmission and distribution infrastructure alongside investments in solar, wind, and hydro-power. While these initiatives align with national energy objectives and global climate goals, their governance effectiveness depends not only on technical implementation but also on how they are communicated within broader sustainability narratives.

Energy-sector communication that emphasizes efficiency, capacity expansion, and investment opportunity alone may offer limited long-term credibility. International investors and climate-finance institutions increasingly assess energy projects through decarbonisation trajectories, energy justice considerations, and climate accountability benchmarks. Framing energy investments as part of Pakistan's contribution to global clean-energy transitions by explicitly linking projects to emissions reduction, energy access, and climate resilience can strengthen narrative coherence and reposition Pakistan as an emerging participant in low-carbon development rather than solely an energy-deficient market.

Agriculture: From Productivity Enhancement to Climate-Resilient and Inclusive Development (SDG 2, SDG 6, SDG 13)

Agriculture remains central to Pakistan's economy and employment, yet the sector faces persistent challenges related to mechanization gaps, water inefficiency, and climate vulnerability. The SIFC-led Green Pakistan Initiative seeks to address these constraints through foreign investment in large-scale farming, precision agriculture, and modern irrigation systems. While such reforms may enhance productivity and competitiveness, they also raise concerns regarding land governance, water equity, and ecological sustainability. The legitimacy of agricultural investment is therefore closely tied to its communication framing. Narratives that privilege scale and efficiency risk marginalizing smallholder farmers and local communities.

By contrast, framing agricultural reform around climate resilience, food security, and participatory rural development enables investment to be understood as a shared development process. Clear communication regarding environmental safeguards, water governance arrangements, and community engagement can mitigate legitimacy risks while aligning agricultural investment with inclusive and climate-resilient development objectives.

Mining and Minerals: From Extraction Efficiency to Responsible Resource Stewardship (SDG 8, SDG 12, SDG 15)

Pakistan's mineral resources particularly copper, gold, and rare earth elements position the country within global supply chains critical to renewable energy technologies and digital infrastructure. SIFC's mining strategy prioritizes accelerated extraction through partnerships with international investors, supporting economic growth objectives. However, in resource-rich and politically sensitive regions, such acceleration also carries risks of environmental degradation, social displacement, and local contestation.

In this context, communication strategy becomes integral to investment governance. Mining narratives centered on speed and revenue generation may amplify perceptions of extractive risk. Alternatively, framing mining investment through responsible extraction, transparency, environmental restoration, and benefit-sharing with affected communities aligns resource development with sustainability norms. Embedding participatory consultation and accountability benchmarks within mining communication can enhance domestic legitimacy and signal compliance with international ESG expectations.

Information Technology: From Growth Promotion to Digital Governance and Human Capital Development (SDG 8, SDG 9)

The information technology sector has emerged as a key driver of Pakistan's economic transformation, offering opportunities for export growth, employment generation, and youth inclusion. While IT investment aligns with innovation and growth objectives, effective promotion requires communication that extends beyond market expansion narratives.

International investors increasingly evaluate digital sectors through regulatory

clarity, data protection, and institutional capacity to manage digital transformation responsibly. Framing IT investment within narratives of human capital development, digital governance, and inclusive access enables SIFC to project institutional maturity alongside economic ambition. Such positioning strengthens investor confidence while reinforcing domestic legitimacy around skills development and youth employment.

6. Synthesis

Collectively, SIFC represents both continuity and change within Pakistan's investment governance landscape. While it operates within historically fragmented institutional structures marked by coordination deficits and implementation challenges, SIFC also reflects an attempt to address these constraints through centralized facilitation and strategic alignment with development priorities.

However, the effectiveness of this approach will be assessed not only through project approvals or capital inflows, but also through its longer-term sustainability, which depends on SIFC's capacity to articulate a coherent investment narrative that integrates sector-specific communication strategies with international sustainability norms, inclusivity principles, and policy coherence across the Sustainable Development Goals. Such narrative alignment is essential not only for advancing national development objectives, but also for positioning Pakistan as a credible and constructive participant in the global development agenda.

7. Future Research Direction

- 1) Conduct the empirical validation using qualitative/quantitative or mix method techniques of the proposed "SIFC-SDGs Communication Nexus" model proposed in this study?
- 2) Future study could also investigate the "Narrative Competition" among regional actors and impact on Pakistan's communication ecosystem?
- 3) Examine how SIFC communication narratives are constructed and interpreted by the citizens, multilateral, and international investors?
- 4) Study civil-military "investment-governance" relationship in Pakistan's economic development narratives? And its impact national economic evolution.
- 5) Assess the UN SDGs alignment with Pakistan's public diplomacy efforts?
- 6) How inter-ministerial coordination within SIFC influences policy coherence across investment, environment, and industrial policy in context of 18th amendment bill, i.e. (Devolution).
- 7) Examine in-depth study on SIFC's partnerships with multilateral banks and climate funds through strategic communication lens?

Conflicts of Interest

The authors declare "No conflict of Interest" related to this research. Study was conducted through an academic collaboration and both the authors contributed equally to conception, analysis and writing.

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