

REVIEWER'S REPORT

Manuscript No.: **IJAR-53956**

Date: 21-09-2025

Title: Human Development Disparities in South Asia: A Panel Data Investigation of Afghanistan and SAARC Countries

Recommendation:

Accept as it is

Accept after minor revision.....

Accept after major revision

Do not accept (*Reasons below*)

Rating	Excel.	Good	Fair	Poor
Originality		✓		
Techn. Quality	✓			
Clarity		✓		
Significance	✓			

Reviewer Name: Dr.P.Manochithra

Date: 21-09-2025

Reviewer's Comment for Publication.

(To be published with the manuscript in the journal)

The reviewer is requested to provide a brief comment (3-4 lines) highlighting the significance, strengths, or key insights of the manuscript. This comment will be Displayed in the journal publication alongside with the reviewers name.

The manuscript provides a rigorous and insightful analysis of human development disparities in South Asia using robust panel data techniques. By highlighting Afghanistan's structural challenges alongside regional comparisons, it offers valuable empirical evidence for policymakers. The study's strength lies in its integration of socioeconomic determinants with policy implications, contributing meaningfully to the discourse on inclusive development.

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Detailed Reviewer's Report

Title of the Manuscript: *Human Development Disparities in South Asia: A Panel Data Investigation of Afghanistan and SAARC Countries*

1. Summary of the Manuscript

The manuscript examines human development disparities among seven SAARC countries from 2000–2023, with particular emphasis on Afghanistan. Using panel econometric techniques, including Fixed Effects models and Pooled OLS estimators, the authors analyze the influence of life expectancy, schooling (average and expected years), and gross national income (GNI) per capita on the Human Development Index (HDI). The study concludes that all variables have statistically significant positive effects on HDI, while Afghanistan continues to lag behind its regional counterparts due to structural barriers. The paper highlights important policy implications for health, education, and inclusive income generation.

2. Strengths

- Relevance and Contribution:** The topic is timely and relevant, especially in the context of sustainable development and regional disparities in South Asia.
- Methodological Rigor:** Robust use of panel data techniques (Fixed Effects, Hausman test, clustered errors) enhances credibility.
- Data Reliability:** The use of UNDP and World Bank datasets adds robustness and transparency to the analysis.
- Policy Orientation:** The policy implications are clearly articulated and align with the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs).
- Comparative Focus:** The juxtaposition of Afghanistan with other SAARC countries provides fresh insights into structural inequalities.

3. Weaknesses and Areas for Improvement

1. Originality:

- While the focus on Afghanistan is important, similar themes have been explored in prior SAARC-related research. The originality is moderate, relying more on methodological robustness than novel theoretical contributions.

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2. Technical Concerns:

- GNI per capita could be log-transformed for better interpretability of coefficients.
- No explicit mention of multicollinearity checks (Variance Inflation Factor or correlation diagnostics beyond the correlation matrix).
- Time fixed effects are not considered, though they could capture shocks (e.g., conflicts, global financial crisis, COVID-19).
- Endogeneity concerns (reverse causality between education/income and HDI) are not fully addressed. Instrumental variable approaches could strengthen the results.

3. Clarity and Presentation:

- Some sections contain long, complex sentences that may reduce readability.
- Figures and tables are informative but could benefit from more concise captions and standardized formatting.
- The conclusion could be more tightly linked to the empirical findings rather than reiterating descriptive content.

4. Policy Discussion:

- While strong, the discussion could integrate more context-specific policy frameworks, such as governance, institutional quality, and political instability—especially in Afghanistan.
- The role of gender equality, particularly in light of restrictions on girls' education, deserves more emphasis.

4. Ratings

Criteria	Rating	Justification
Originality	Good	Focus on Afghanistan is valuable, but broader theme has been studied in prior SAARC research.
Technical Quality	Excellent	Use of panel econometrics, robust diagnostics, and credible data sources.
Clarity	Good	Well-structured but needs language refinement and tighter presentation.
Significance	Excellent	Strong policy relevance, especially for Afghanistan's development and SDG progress.

5. Recommendations for Improvement

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- Consider log-transforming GNI per capita and testing for multicollinearity.
- Explore robustness checks with time fixed effects or alternative specifications.
- Expand discussion on governance and institutional quality as drivers of human development disparities.
- Strengthen emphasis on gender disparities and the long-term impacts of restrictions on girls' education in Afghanistan.
- Revise language for conciseness and improve figure/table presentation.

6. Overall Recommendation

Decision: Accept with Minor Revisions

This manuscript makes a meaningful contribution to the literature on human development disparities in South Asia. Its empirical rigor and policy relevance outweigh minor limitations in clarity and model specification. With revisions to strengthen presentation and address technical concerns, it is well-suited for publication.