INTERNATIONAL PREMIER JOURNAL OF LANGUAGES & LITERATURE (IPJLL)
VOLUME 4, ISSUE 3, 2026 p-ISSN: 3007-2336 e-ISSN: 3007-2344

A CRITICAL DISCOURSE ANALYSIS OF ECOLOGICAL SUSTAINABILITY IN THE LIVING INDUS INITIATIVE

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Abstract

Ecological restoration programmers are communicated as much as they are implemented. This study examines how ecological sustainability is represented in the official discourse of Pakistan's Living Indus Initiative, a national programmed to restore the Indus Basin through nature-based solutions, and how language, institutional practice and ideology interact in that representation. Adopting a qualitative, interpretivist design, the study applies Fairclough's three-dimensional framework to purposively selected policy documents, reports and publications issued by the Government of Pakistan and its institutional partners, analyzing them at the levels of text, discursive practice and sociocultural practice. The analysis shows that sustainability is constructed as an integrated national project spanning ecosystem restoration, biodiversity, climate resilience, livelihoods and governance. This construction relies on positive lexicalization, high-value modality, nominalization, evaluative adjectives, inclusive pronouns and a small set of river metaphors, while institutions, rather than communities or ecosystems, are positioned as the principal agents of change. Joint authorship by state and international partners, wide circulation and dense intertextual alignment with global frameworks lend the discourse authority. At the level of social practice, the discourse articulates an ideology of sustainable development, builds consensus by minimizing conflict and blame, and frames environmental justice as an outcome of good governance. The paper argues that participation is invited but institutionally managed, and it discusses implications for ecolinguistics, environmental communication and policy writing.

Keywords: *Critical Discourse Analysis, Ecolinguistics, Ecological Sustainability, Environmental Discourse, Fairclough's Three-Dimensional Framework, Living Indus Initiative, Pakistan*

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1. Introduction

Ecological sustainability is no longer only a scientific proposition. It is also a public story, told by governments, international organisations and development agencies, about what is wrong with the environment, who must act, and what counts as an acceptable remedy. The Sustainable Development Goals carry this story into the language of policy: Goals 6, 13, 14 and 15 tie water, climate, marine and terrestrial ecosystems to governance and social progress (United Nations, 2015). Because most people meet environmental problems through texts rather than first-hand experience, the vocabulary and grammar of those texts shape how problems are understood, who is held accountable, and which responses appear reasonable (Dryzek, 2013; Fairclough, 1995; Hajer, 1995).

Pakistan is a revealing site for this inquiry. The country contributes little to global greenhouse-gas emissions yet is among the states most exposed to climate impacts, including floods, drought, glacial melt, water scarcity and land degradation (World Bank, 2022). The Indus Basin is central both to that exposure and to the national economy: it is home to roughly nine-tenths of Pakistan's people and irrigates about four-fifths of its arable land (United Nations Multi-Partner Trust Fund Office, n.d.). The Living Indus Initiative, launched by the Government of Pakistan in collaboration with the United Nations in 2022, responds with a basin-wide programme of ecosystem restoration organised around 25 priority interventions (Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations [FAO], n.d.). In 2024 it was selected as a World Restoration Flagship of the UN Decade on Ecosystem Restoration (Press Information Department, 2024).

Programmes of this scale do not only restore wetlands and river flows. They also generate a body of texts (programme reports, strategic frameworks, policy statements) that tell the nation what sustainability means and who is responsible for achieving it. Scholarly and policy attention to Living Indus has largely concentrated on its ecological objectives, implementation strategies and expected outcomes. How its official language constructs ecological sustainability, allocates roles among state, international partners and communities, and legitimises a particular model of environmental governance has received far less scrutiny. Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) is well suited to that question because it treats texts as social practice, linking close linguistic description to institutional processes and wider relations of power.

1.1. Research Questions

This article applies Fairclough's (1992, 1995, 2003) three-dimensional framework to official Living Indus documents. It addresses three research questions:

1. How is ecological sustainability represented in the Living Indus Initiative?
2. What linguistic features are used to promote ecological sustainability in the Living Indus Initiative?

3. How does the discourse of the Living Indus Initiative reflect environmental ideology and power relations?

1.2. Research Objectives

The study pursues three corresponding objectives:

1. To examine how ecological sustainability is represented in the Living Indus Initiative.
2. To identify the linguistic features used to promote ecological sustainability in the Living Indus Initiative.
3. To analyse how the discourse of the Living Indus Initiative reflects environmental ideology and power relations.

The argument, in brief, is that the initiative constructs sustainability as an optimistic, consensual and nationally shared project, and that the same linguistic resources that make this construction persuasive also keep institutional actors at the centre of environmental decision-making. The remainder of the article reviews relevant literature (Section 2), sets out the methodology (Section 3), presents the analysis at the three levels of Fairclough's model (Section 4), discusses the findings (Section 5), and concludes with limitations and directions for future research (Section 6).

2. Literature Review

2.1. Sustainability as a Constructed and Contested Idea

The Brundtland Commission defined sustainable development as development that meets present needs without limiting the ability of future generations to meet theirs (World Commission on Environment and Development [WCED], 1987, p. 43). The definition's influence owes much to its openness, which allows environmental protection, economic growth and social justice to be presented as compatible. Successive international frameworks, from Agenda 21 to the 2030 Agenda, have widened the concept from conservation towards governance, participation and institutional cooperation (United Nations, 2015).

Environmental discourse scholarship stresses that this breadth is not neutral. Dryzek (2013) describes a family of environmental discourses, among them ecological modernisation, sustainable development, green radicalism and survivalism, which differ in what they take nature to be, how they allocate responsibility, and how far they expect existing economic arrangements to change. Ecological modernisation, for example, holds that environmental protection and growth can be reconciled through technological and institutional innovation, whereas green radicalism calls for deeper change in the human–nature relationship and in patterns of consumption. Hajer (1995) showed that environmental policy is shaped by competing narratives as much as by evidence, so that the legitimacy of a solution depends on the discourse in which it is framed. Framing is central here: describing ecosystem restoration as economic investment, as biodiversity

conservation or as climate adaptation foregrounds different problems, assigns responsibility to different actors and invites different policy responses.

2.2. Ecolinguistics and the Language of Environmental Policy

Ecolinguistics examines the role of language in the relationships among humans, other species and the physical environment. Stibbe (2021) argues that societies are shaped by the stories they live by, and that these stories can either legitimise ecologically destructive practices or support ecological wellbeing. Alexander and Stibbe (2014) proposed moving from the analysis of ecological discourse to the ecological analysis of discourse, that is, evaluating texts of any kind by their likely effects on ecological outcomes. Within this tradition, the linguistic resources most often examined are specialised terminology, evaluation, metaphor, modality, nominalisation and passivisation. Fairclough (2003) notes that nominalisation and the passive can remove agents from the clause, presenting processes rather than the people or institutions responsible for them.

Recent empirical studies have applied these ideas across genres. Zhang and Jocuns (2023) combined multimodal CDA with ecolinguistics to analyse eight environmental news items from Asian-targeted and Western-targeted English-language outlets, and identified three dominant ideologies marked by the obfuscation of causal agents and a corresponding focus on the results of the processes those agents drive. Huang (2023) analysed 501 collaborative essays written by approximately 2,000 Chinese university students and found a comprehensive understanding of the three dimensions of sustainability, a tendency to see themselves as active participants, and also signs of superficial green talk and anthropocentrism. Firdaus (2026) analysed transcripts of the 2024 Indonesian presidential debate and found that sustainability was framed predominantly through technocratic modernisation narratives, with agrarian and ethical counter-narratives offering a contrasting discourse of stewardship and socio-ecological justice. In Pakistan, Nasir and Habib (2022) offered a multimodal ecolinguistic analysis of media discourse around the Clean Green Pakistan policy. At a broader level, Nervino et al. (2024) systematically reviewed 114 applied linguistics articles on sustainability discourse, charting topics, data types, frameworks and findings, and thereby mapping the field in which studies such as the present one sit.

2.3. Critical Discourse Analysis and Fairclough's Three-Dimensional Framework

CDA treats language as social practice: a means by which institutions and individuals produce knowledge, construct identities, and legitimise or challenge authority (Fairclough, 1992; Wodak & Meyer, 2016). It draws on systemic functional linguistics (Halliday & Matthiessen, 2014) and on social theory, including Gramsci's (1971) account of hegemony as the winning of consent. Prominent approaches include van Dijk's (2008) socio-cognitive model, which foregrounds the cognitive frameworks through which

discourse reproduces dominance, and Wodak's discourse-historical approach, which emphasises historical and institutional context (Wodak & Meyer, 2016). Despite differences, these approaches share the premises that language is not ideologically neutral, that it both represents and constitutes social reality, and that linguistic choices help establish and maintain power relations.

Fairclough's (1992, 1995, 2003) framework analyses any communicative event at three interconnected levels. The first, text, describes vocabulary, grammar, transitivity, modality, evaluation, metaphor, cohesion and nominalisation. The second, discursive practice, interprets how texts are produced, distributed and consumed, and how they draw on prior texts (intertextuality) and combine different discourse types (interdiscursivity). The third, sociocultural practice, explains the discourse in relation to ideology, power, hegemony and the wider political and institutional context. The model suits official policy documents because it keeps the linguistic detail of a text in view alongside the institutional processes that produce it and the social structures it reproduces or transforms.

2.4. Theoretical Framework

The study is grounded in Norman Fairclough's three-dimensional framework of Critical Discourse Analysis (Fairclough, 1992, 1995, 2003). Fairclough holds that discourse must be examined at three interrelated levels at the same time, because the linguistic significance of a text cannot be fully understood without taking into account how it is produced and the wider social setting in which it operates.

The first dimension, textual analysis (description), concerns the linguistic features of the text. This study examines vocabulary, syntax, transitivity, modality, nominalisation, metaphor, coherence, lexical choice and evaluative language, asking what role each plays in depicting ecological sustainability in the selected documents. The second dimension, discursive practice (interpretation), concerns the production, circulation, interpretation and consumption of texts in institutional settings, with particular emphasis on institutional authorship, intended audience, intertextuality and interdiscursivity. It allows the study to assess how the Living Indus documents function as institutional discourse that aligns national efforts with international sustainability goals and communicates governmental environmental action.

The third dimension, sociocultural practice (explanation), concerns the ideological and social circumstances of the discourse: the dynamics of authority, environmental philosophy, institutional power, ecological citizenship and sustainable development. As Fairclough (2003) argues, discourse both reflects society and helps to maintain and change social institutions. This level therefore explains how the initiative positions ecological sustainability as an essential national development objective while supporting particular institutional orientations. Together, the three dimensions form an analytical framework suited to the research questions, linking linguistic choices, institutional communicative

practices and ideological interpretation.

2.5. Research Gap

Research on environmental discourse has expanded rapidly since 2020, using CDA, ecolinguistics, corpus methods and multimodal analysis to examine news media, political speeches, corporate communication and education. Within Pakistan, work has concentrated on media representation, campaigns and awareness rather than on official policy documents. The Living Indus Initiative has been studied mainly in terms of its ecological aims, implementation and anticipated impacts, not its language. Fairclough's model, widely used for political, educational, media and corporate discourse, has seldom been applied systematically to a national ecosystem-restoration programme in Pakistan. The present study addresses this gap by analysing, at all three levels, how Living Indus documents construct ecological sustainability, promote it linguistically, and embed it in ideology and power relations.

3. Methodology

3.1. Paradigm and Design

The study is situated in the interpretivist paradigm, which treats reality as socially constructed and meaning as produced through interaction and interpretation rather than fixed in advance (Crotty, 1998; Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). A qualitative descriptive design was adopted because the aim was to explain how meanings, ideologies and power relations are encoded in institutional language, not to measure the frequency of linguistic items or test hypotheses statistically (Creswell & Poth, 2018). CDA is consistent with this stance, as it regards discourse as a social practice that both reflects and shapes society (Fairclough, 1992).

3.2. Corpus

The data comprise purposively selected official documents on the Living Indus Initiative published by the Government of Pakistan, including the Ministry of Climate Change and Environmental Coordination, and by its institutional partners. They include programme reports, policy documents, strategic frameworks and other official publications that set out the initiative's objectives, implementation strategies and expected outcomes (Living Indus Initiative, 2023; Ministry of Climate Change and Environmental Coordination, 2023; United Nations Development Programme, 2023). The documents are in English and are addressed to policymakers, development partners, researchers, civil society and the wider public. The study does not evaluate the initiative's ecological effectiveness; it analyses how the selected texts represent ecological sustainability.

3.3. Analytical Procedure

The analysis followed Fairclough's three dimensions in turn (Table 1). Textual analysis examined lexical choices, transitivity, modality, evaluation, nominalisation, pronouns and metaphor. The analysis of discursive practice examined institutional

authorship, circulation, intended audiences, intertextuality and interdiscursivity. The analysis of sociocultural practice interpreted the findings in relation to ideology, institutional power, legitimation, hegemony, ecological citizenship and environmental justice. Findings are organised thematically rather than document by document, so that recurring discursive patterns can be traced across the corpus. Four themes structure the textual analysis: the construction of ecological sustainability; nature-based solutions and ecosystem restoration; community participation and environmental stewardship; and climate resilience and environmental governance.

Table 1

Analytical framework

Dimension	Analytical focus	Features examined	Research questions addressed
Text (description)	Linguistic organisation of the documents	Lexis, transitivity, modality, evaluation, nominalisation, pronouns, metaphor	RQ1, RQ2
Discursive practice (interpretation)	Production, distribution and consumption	Institutional authorship, circulation, audiences, intertextuality, interdiscursivity	RQ1, RQ3
Sociocultural practice (explanation)	Wider social and ideological context	Ideology, power, legitimation, hegemony, ecological citizenship, environmental justice	RQ3

3.4. Ethics and Trustworthiness

The study analysed publicly available institutional documents and involved no human participants, so no participant consent procedures were required. Because the identification of features such as evaluation and metaphor involves interpretation, the analysis aims for transparency rather than claims of objectivity: patterns are reported as recurring across the corpus, interpretations are tied to the textual evidence that prompts them, and the limits of the approach are stated in Section 6.

4. Findings

4.1. Textual Dimension: how Sustainability is worded

4.1.1. Sustainability as a National Priority

Across the corpus, ecological sustainability is repeatedly associated with ecosystem restoration, biodiversity conservation, climate resilience, sustainable livelihoods and national development. Restoration is thereby positioned as a condition of Pakistan’s socio-economic future rather than a narrow environmental concern. The

documents foreground expressions such as *ecosystem restoration, nature-based solutions, climate resilience, river health, community resilience, sustainable development* and *environmental stewardship,* which together form a semantic field of renewal. Degradation, floods, biodiversity loss and climate vulnerability are acknowledged, but they are promptly accompanied by solution-oriented vocabulary. Readers are thus invited to treat ecological problems as manageable through coordinated institutional action rather than as irreversible failures.

Evaluative adjectives reinforce this orientation. The initiative is described as *transformative, integrated, innovative, inclusive, sustainable, resilient* and *long-term,* so it is evaluated favourably before its outcomes can be assessed. In Fairclough's (1995) terms, evaluation is an ideological resource because it encourages readers to accept particular interpretations as self-evidently desirable; here, sustainability becomes a moral and developmental imperative. High-value modality (*will, must, is committed to*) and a preference for categorical over tentative statements strengthen the institutional voice, while inclusive pronouns (*our rivers, our ecosystems, our communities, our future*) dissolve the distance between state and citizen and construct a shared national identity. Abstract nominalisations such as *restoration, adaptation, conservation, management, protection, governance, implementation* and *collaboration* shift attention from individual actors to institutional processes, so governmental programmes appear continuous, objective and systematic rather than dependent on particular political actors.

4.1.2. Nature-based Solutions and the Language of Restoration

Nature-based solutions are presented as the primary mechanism for addressing Pakistan's ecological and climate challenges. Nature is framed not as a passive resource to be exploited but as a partner capable of restoring balance, supporting human wellbeing and strengthening resilience. This marks a shift from development discourse centred on engineering and infrastructure towards an ecological paradigm of restoration, conservation and sustainable resource management. A representative statement across the programme documents describes a national programme that seeks to restore the ecological health of the Indus Basin through nature-based solutions that at once improve biodiversity, strengthen climate resilience and enhance local livelihoods.

The lexis of such statements is deliberately positive and transformative: *restore, ecological health, biodiversity, resilience, livelihoods* and *sustainability* belong to a semantic field of recovery rather than crisis. The repeated choice of *restoration* is significant. Unlike *repair* or *recovery,* it implies a return to a healthier and more balanced condition and so carries ecological, scientific and moral connotations. The transitivity pattern assigns agency in a consistent way (Halliday & Matthiessen, 2014). Government institutions and programme partners are the actors of material processes such as *implement, restore, protect, strengthen, promote* and *support,* whereas ecosystems,

biodiversity, wetlands, forests and river systems are typically the recipients of these actions. There is a subtle tension here: nature is lexically a capable partner yet grammatically the beneficiary of institutional intervention.

Metaphor adds emotional and moral weight. Although the register is mostly scientific, the Indus is occasionally framed as the *lifeline* of Pakistan and ecosystems as living systems that require care and renewal. By treating the river as a component of national identity, prosperity and survival, the metaphor encourages readers to see degradation as a threat to collective existence and restoration as a patriotic responsibility. Overall, lexical choices, transitivity, modality, nominalisation, evaluation and metaphor work together to establish restoration as the preferred environmental response, while the discourse minimises conflict and avoids assigning explicit blame for historical ecological degradation.

4.1.3. Community Participation and Environmental Stewardship

Community participation is constructed as indispensable to ecological sustainability. The documents present local communities, farmers, women, youth, indigenous groups, civil society organisations and development partners as active participants, and describe restoration as requiring cooperation among government agencies, communities, academia, international organisations and the private sector. Environmental responsibility is thereby extended beyond the state and framed as a shared national commitment.

The vocabulary of this theme includes *partnership*, *collaboration*, *community engagement*, *stakeholder participation*, *local knowledge*, *collective action*, *shared responsibility*, *inclusive development* and *capacity building*. Such terms form a semantic network of cooperation rather than hierarchy and construct governance as collaborative rather than authoritarian. Inclusive pronouns reinforce the effect: by uniting policymakers and citizens within a common mission, they reduce institutional distance while subtly presenting stewardship as both a civic and a moral duty (Fairclough, 1995). Evaluation is uniformly favourable; communities are described as *resilient*, *empowered*, *active*, *inclusive*, *innovative* and *knowledgeable*, and negative evaluation of communities is almost entirely absent. Degradation is rarely attributed to local populations.

The transitivity analysis qualifies this picture. Institutions are the actors of verbs such as *engage*, *empower*, *support*, *strengthen*, *mobilise*, *promote* and *facilitate*, while communities are mostly those who are *supported*, *empowered*, *engaged*, *strengthened* and *enabled*. Participation is also nominalised (*community engagement*, *stakeholder participation*, *capacity development*, *knowledge sharing*), which foregrounds organised institutional processes and backgrounds who does what. Interpersonally, the discourse adopts an inclusive, partnership-oriented style: readers are invited to become participants rather than commanded to comply. Yet the grammar shows that governmental institutions

remain the principal decision-makers, so participation is cooperative but carefully managed.

4.1.4. Climate Resilience and Environmental Governance

Climate change is portrayed not simply as an environmental issue but as a multidimensional challenge affecting water resources, biodiversity, agriculture, food security, livelihoods and national development. The initiative is accordingly positioned as a comprehensive response that strengthens ecological systems while improving human resilience. Recurring references to adaptive capacity, ecosystem restoration, integrated water resource management, disaster risk reduction and sustainable environmental governance link ecological restoration to socio-economic development and institutional reform, in line with global sustainability discourse.

The lexis is technical, institutional and future-oriented: *climate resilience*, *adaptation*, *mitigation*, *ecosystem services*, *integrated management*, *risk reduction*, *water security*, *resilient communities* and *long-term resilience*. The adjective *resilient* is particularly productive. It is attributed not only to ecosystems but also to communities, institutions, livelihoods and development systems, which broadens its meaning from ecological recovery to a holistic national objective and constructs adaptation as an ongoing process of coordinated institutional planning rather than a series of emergency responses. Government agencies, international organisations and programme partners act through processes such as *strengthen*, *restore*, *enhance*, *protect*, *implement*, *develop* and *coordinate*, while wetlands, rivers, biodiversity and vulnerable communities are the recipients; in Fairclough's (2003) terms, the transitivity shows who acts, who receives action and who is absent. Modality (*will restore*, *will strengthen*, *must protect*, *will ensure*) presents interventions as both achievable and necessary, so resilience appears as a national obligation rather than an optional policy choice. Metaphors of the river as *lifeblood* and ecosystems as the nation's *natural capital* tie environmental health to national survival and economic security. Confrontational or accusatory language is rare; collaboration, partnership and shared responsibility replace explicit attribution of blame, which yields a consensual rather than conflict-oriented representation of governance.

Table 2

Linguistic resources promoting ecological sustainability in the corpus

Linguistic resource	Typical realisations	Discursive function
Positive lexicalisation	restoration, resilience, nature-based solutions, partnership, innovation	Frames degradation as manageable and recovery as achievable

Linguistic resource	Typical realisations	Discursive function
Material processes	restore, protect, strengthen, implement, promote, support	Casts government and partners as active agents
High-value modality	will, must, is committed to	Projects certainty and institutional resolve
Evaluative adjectives	transformative, integrated, inclusive, innovative, sustainable, resilient	Evaluates the programme favourably before outcomes can be assessed
Nominalisation	restoration, adaptation, governance, implementation, capacity-building	Depersonalises decisions and implies continuity
Inclusive pronouns	our rivers, our future, our communities	Constructs collective ownership and shared duty
Metaphor	the river as lifeline or lifeblood; ecosystems as natural capital	Links ecological health to national survival and prosperity

4.2. Discursive Practice: Production, Circulation and Interpretation

4.2.1. Institutional Production

The Living Indus documents are produced by the Government of Pakistan, the Ministry of Climate Change and Environmental Coordination, United Nations agencies and development partners, with contributions from environmental experts, policy analysts and practitioners. They therefore embody what Fairclough (1995) describes as institutional discourse, in which authority derives from organisations rather than individual authors. Official issue and United Nations backing encourage readers to treat the information as scientifically reliable, politically legitimate and internationally endorsed, which narrows the space for questioning environmental claims. Institutional production is itself a discursive strategy: institutions hold the symbolic authority to define problems, identify solutions and establish legitimate forms of ecological knowledge. Collaborative authorship also brings environmental science, economics, climate policy, biodiversity conservation, disaster management and community development into one institutional voice, which constructs sustainability as a multidimensional policy objective.

4.2.2. Circulation

The corpus circulates through official government websites, United Nations platforms, policy reports, environmental conferences, international development forums, academic publications, media releases and stakeholder consultations. This breadth extends the discourse's influence: officials, researchers, donors, civil society organisations and communities can all become consumers of the same institutional narrative, delivered through authoritative channels that preserve a consistent ideological orientation

(Fairclough, 1992). Digital publication allows the texts to be repeatedly accessed, shared, cited and incorporated into policy documents, educational materials and campaigns, which gradually normalises ecological sustainability as an institutional and public commitment.

4.2.3. Audiences and Interpretation

The documents address several audiences at once. Nationally these include policymakers, government departments, provincial authorities, environmental agencies, researchers, universities, civil society and local communities; internationally they include United Nations agencies, donors, development partners, environmental non-governmental organisations, climate finance institutions and global networks. The linguistic organisation reflects this plural readership: technical terminology lends scientific credibility for specialists, while accessible explanation supports wider understanding. Interpretation depends on readers' prior knowledge and social positions (Fairclough, 1995). Scientists may attend to biodiversity indicators, policymakers to governance strategy, and communities to livelihoods and water security. The documents nonetheless steer all readers towards a preferred reading, namely that ecological restoration is both scientifically necessary and socially beneficial. Because this study analyses texts rather than reception, that preferred reading is an interpretation of textual design, not evidence of how readers actually respond.

4.2.4. Intertextuality

Intertextuality is one of the strongest characteristics of the corpus. The documents repeatedly draw on principles and commitments from internationally recognised frameworks, including the Paris Agreement, the Sustainable Development Goals, the UN Decade on Ecosystem Restoration, the National Climate Change Policy and the Convention on Biological Diversity. By aligning national policy with these texts, the initiative borrows legitimacy from them (Fairclough, 2003) and presents its aims as consistent with accepted global principles. Internationally recognised principles are thereby offered as shared knowledge rather than contested political choices, which reduces potential resistance.

4.2.5. Interdiscursivity

The corpus combines environmental, scientific, governmental policy, sustainable development, climate, biodiversity, economic development and community-participation discourses. Restoration is presented at once as an environmental necessity, an economic investment, a climate adaptation strategy, a biodiversity programme and a social development initiative. This interdiscursive blend broadens the initiative's appeal because different stakeholders can recognise their own interests within it. In Fairclough's terms it is an ideological strategy, since it helps institutions construct consensus among diverse social groups.

4.2.6. Summary of the Second Dimension

Institutional authorship, authoritative dissemination, carefully designed audiences, intertextual references and interdiscursive integration collectively strengthen the legitimacy of the initiative. Government agencies and international organisations emerge as recognised producers of environmental knowledge, while readers are positioned as participants in a wider project of ecological restoration and sustainable development. Discursive practice therefore contributes to the reproduction of institutional authority as well as to the promotion of sustainability.

4.3. Sociocultural Practice: Ideology, Power and Legitimation

4.3.1. Environmental Ideology

The dominant ideological position in the corpus is that environmental protection and socio-economic development are complementary rather than contradictory. Ecological restoration is consistently presented as a pathway to economic growth, poverty reduction, climate resilience, biodiversity conservation and human wellbeing. This is an ideology of sustainable development, in which conservation is integrated into national planning rather than treated as a separate sector. The discourse implicitly challenges development models that prioritise rapid industrialisation without regard to ecological consequences, and represents rivers, wetlands, forests and biodiversity as ecological assets that sustain agriculture, livelihoods and public health. As Fairclough (1995) argues, ideology works by making particular assumptions appear natural; the repeated association of restoration with national development makes sustainability a self-evident objective, not an optional government programme.

4.3.2. Power Relations and Institutional Authority

Although the initiative emphasises community participation and collaborative governance, governmental institutions remain the principal authorities who define environmental problems, design interventions, allocate resources and evaluate outcomes. Power is exercised not only through legal authority but also through the production of knowledge: by determining which issues receive attention and how they are represented, institutional actors shape public understanding of sustainability. The documents define biodiversity loss, ecosystem degradation, water insecurity and climate change as urgent national priorities while presenting the initiative as their legitimate solution. International organisations lend credibility and connect national policy to global agendas, but their involvement also illustrates the influence of international environmental governance on domestic policymaking. The discourse thus becomes a site where national priorities and global frameworks intersect.

4.3.3. Governance and Policy Legitimation

The documents consistently portray government policy as scientifically informed, evidence-based and internationally aligned. Recurrent references to research, scientific

expertise, technical knowledge and international cooperation represent environmental policy as an objective response to ecological reality rather than as political negotiation. Restoration is rarely debated or questioned; it is treated as the only reasonable response to Pakistan's environmental challenges. This presentation of institutional decisions as common sense strengthens public confidence while reinforcing governmental authority.

4.3.4. Ecological Citizenship

The documents encourage citizens to see environmental responsibility as part of their civic identity. Community participation, stewardship, responsible water use, biodiversity conservation and sustainable livelihoods are presented as responsibilities shared by all members of society, and farmers, youth, women, local communities, educational institutions and civil society organisations are cast as essential partners. Citizens are thus constructed as contributors to restoration rather than only beneficiaries of government programmes. From Fairclough's perspective this has an ideological function: it invites individuals to internalise environmental responsibility, so that ecological citizenship is normalised through discourse rather than imposed through regulation alone.

4.3.5. Hegemony and Consensus

Fairclough's concept of hegemony, developed from Gramsci (1971), explains how dominant institutions secure consent through discourse rather than coercion. The Living Indus corpus builds consensus by stressing shared national interests, collective responsibility and common goals, and by describing governance in terms of cooperation, partnership, innovation and mutual benefit instead of controversy. It minimises conflict between economic development and environmental protection by presenting them as mutually reinforcing. Differences among government agencies, international organisations and local communities are largely absent; all stakeholders appear united in pursuing sustainability. This consensual representation is hegemonic in that it invites readers to accept the initiative's agenda as universally beneficial.

4.3.6. Environmental justice and Social Inclusion

The documents acknowledge that climate change and ecosystem degradation disproportionately affect vulnerable groups, particularly communities that depend on the Indus system for agriculture, fisheries and livelihoods, and they link restoration to poverty reduction, food security, gender inclusion and community resilience. Yet while social inequalities are acknowledged, the emphasis falls on institutional solutions rather than on structural political or economic conflicts. Environmental justice is framed as an outcome of effective environmental governance, not of broader socio-economic transformation, which reflects a reform-oriented environmental ideology that prioritises institutional collaboration and policy implementation.

4.3.7. Summary of the Third Dimension

At the level of sociocultural practice, the Living Indus Initiative functions as a powerful institutional discourse. It constructs ecological sustainability as both a national necessity and a global responsibility, promotes an ideology of sustainable development, reproduces institutional authority by positioning government and international partners as producers of environmental knowledge, and builds hegemonic consensus by treating sustainability as an unquestionable public good.

5. Discussion

5.1. Representation and Linguistic Resources

Ecological sustainability in the Living Indus documents is represented as comprehensive and integrated. It spans ecosystem restoration, biodiversity conservation, climate resilience, sustainable livelihoods, water security and environmental governance, and it is positioned as a prerequisite for national development, social wellbeing and resilience rather than a narrow environmental objective. It is worded through a vocabulary of renewal and possibility rather than crisis, and cast as a collective national responsibility. The linguistic resources that promote this representation (Table 2) operate cumulatively. Positive lexicalisation sets an optimistic tone; material processes assign agency; high-value modality and evaluative adjectives project certainty and desirability; nominalisation depersonalises policy action and implies continuity; inclusive pronouns build collective ownership; and metaphor ties the health of the river to national survival. No single feature carries the construction. Each reinforces the others, which explains why the discourse reads as coherent and persuasive.

5.2. Ideology and Power

At the level of sociocultural practice the discourse articulates an ideology of sustainable development, in which environmental protection, economic growth and social wellbeing are mutually supportive. It resembles the reformist family of environmental discourses described by Dryzek (2013), which seek solutions within existing institutions and economic arrangements. The central finding concerns how power is distributed. Participation is repeatedly invited, yet the grammar of agency leaves government agencies and international partners as the principal producers of environmental knowledge and the principal agents of restoration, while communities participate within a framework those institutions establish. The consensus built around restoration is a hegemonic achievement in the sense of Gramsci (1971) and Fairclough (1992): tensions between conservation, economic priorities and political interests, and differences among agencies, partners and communities, are largely absent, and restoration is treated as the only reasonable response. Blame for historical degradation is not assigned, and environmental justice is framed as an outcome of good governance rather than of structural change.

5.3. Relation to Previous Research

These findings are consistent with research showing that institutional environmental discourse builds legitimacy through positive evaluation, scientific authority and appeals to consensus, and they also nuance it. Zhang and Jocuns (2023) found that environmental news obscures causal agents; in the Living Indus corpus, by contrast, institutions are foregrounded as the agents of remedy, and what remains unattributed is responsibility for past degradation. Huang's (2023) student writers positioned themselves as active participants and called for coordinated action by all relevant parties; the official discourse likewise invites participation, but within a framework in which institutions coordinate. Firdaus (2026) identified a technocratic modernisation narrative contested by ethical and agrarian counter-narratives in political debate, whereas the Living Indus corpus, a consensus-oriented genre, shows few visible counter-narratives. Comparisons across genres call for caution, but together these studies suggest that the visibility of dissent is as informative as the presence of persuasive resources. By applying all three dimensions of Fairclough's model to a national restoration programme, the present study extends this literature to an under-studied policy context.

5.4 Implications

Theoretically, the study confirms the applicability of Fairclough's framework to environmental policy discourse in a South Asian national context. It suggests that CDA of such discourse should attend not only to what is said about nature but also to who is positioned to speak, act and decide on its behalf. For ecolinguistics, it shows that positive environmental framing can raise ecological awareness and consolidate institutional authority at the same time. In practical terms, the present discursive strategies are effective in building consensus and projecting credibility, but greater transparency about decision-making authority could strengthen rather than undermine public trust. Naming explicitly the mechanisms through which community input shapes policy, rather than relying chiefly on inclusive pronouns and collaborative vocabulary, would deepen the participatory character the documents already claim. Development communicators can also see how lexical choice, modality and transitivity may be used deliberately to present environmental interventions as credible, urgent and achievable.

6. Conclusion

This study has shown that the official discourse of the Living Indus Initiative constructs ecological sustainability as a scientifically grounded, morally desirable and nationally significant objective through a coordinated set of lexical, grammatical and rhetorical strategies. Applying Fairclough's three-dimensional framework to text, discursive practice and sociocultural practice, it has demonstrated that language does not merely describe environmental policy: it shapes public understanding of ecological restoration, legitimises institutional authority and cultivates a sense of ecological

citizenship. The promotion of sustainability and the reproduction of institutional power are discursively intertwined in this case, a pattern likely to be of interest wherever large environmental programmes are communicated to national and international audiences.

6.1. Limitations

The study has four main limitations. First, it analyses published documents and does not capture how the discourse is received, interpreted or contested by different audiences, including affected communities along the Indus Basin. Second, Fairclough's framework involves interpretation in identifying and classifying features such as evaluation and metaphor, so another analyst might foreground different examples while reaching broadly compatible conclusions. Third, the corpus consists of English-language documents addressed mainly to national and international institutional audiences; Urdu or regional-language materials circulated among local communities may reflect different discursive strategies. Fourth, because the corpus comprises programme and policy documents rather than implementation records, the study speaks to how sustainability is discursively constructed, not to whether restoration outcomes on the ground match the discourse's claims.

6.2. Directions for Future Research

Five directions follow from these findings and limitations:

1. Reception studies, using interviews or focus groups alongside textual analysis, to examine how policymakers, development partners and local communities interpret and respond to the Living Indus discourse.
2. Comparative CDA of Urdu- or regional-language materials associated with the initiative, to test whether the strategies identified here hold across languages and audiences.
3. Longitudinal analysis of how the discourse evolves as implementation progresses and measurable ecological outcomes become available.
4. Comparative research situating Living Indus alongside other national restoration or climate-resilience programmes in South Asia, to establish whether its linguistic strategies are specific to Pakistan or reflect a wider pattern.
5. Multimodal analysis of infographics, campaign videos and social media content associated with the initiative.

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