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Use of Geopolymers for Environmental Sustainability

Vikas Bagga [1], Chadetrik Rout [2,*]

Abstract

Geopolymers are a rapidly growing matter with enormous potential for improving environmental sustainability in the construction sector. This study highlights the use of geopolymers as eco-friendly alternatives to traditional building materials, with special emphasis on their role in reducing the environmental effect of construction operations. It also focuses on the chemical composition, mechanical characteristics, environmental sustainability, etc. of geopolymers, along with their benefits over conventional materials such as portland cement. Key themes covered include the use of industrial byproducts and waste materials in geopolymer manufacture, lowering carbon emissions associated with concrete manufacturing, and improving structural durability and lifecycle with geopolymers. Furthermore, it looks into the economic feasibility and scalability, evaluating its potential to transform the building sector while achieving sustainable development goals. This study seeks to convey useful insights into various benefits of geopolymers for environmental sustainability by conducting a thorough survey of current literature and research findings, paving the path for their wider acceptance in construction practices.

Keywords: Geopolymers, sustainability, waste management, carbon footprint, life cycle assessment, circular economy

INTRODUCTION

Geopolymers have gained significant interest in recent years due to their unique properties and potential applications across various industries. It is a synthetic aluminosilicate material made by reacting silicon (Si) and aluminium (Al) rich source materials with an alkali activator solution [1]. Unlike typical Portland cement, which is made via the energy-intensive clinker manufacturing method, geopolymers may be synthesized at considerably lower temperatures, frequently below 100°C [2]. greatly lowering carbon emissions associated with their production. These are important because of their flexibility and long-term sustainability properties [3]. Geopolymers, which use industrial byproducts like fly ash, slag, or metakaolin as source materials, not only provide a feasible waste management option but also reduce the environmental effect of typical cement manufacturing [4]. This element is consistent with the growing need to drift to more sustainable techniques in construction and manufacturing. Furthermore, geopolymers exhibit superior mechanical properties, including high compressive and flexural strengths, resistance to chemical corrosion, and fire resistance [5,6]. These properties make them ideal for a variety of applications, including but not limited to concrete manufacturing, protective coatings, thermal insulators, and even 3D printing of structural components. Geopolymers are viable alternatives to traditional concrete in the building sector because of their better durability and low carbon footprint [7]. By substituting Portland cement with geopolymers in concrete mixes, builders may produce structures that are not only stronger and more resilient to harsh conditions but also help to reduce greenhouse gas (GHG) emissions related to construction activities [8]. Furthermore, geopolymers have found applications outside of building, such as production of lightweight, fire-resistant materials for the aerospace and automobile sectors [9]. Their ability to tolerate high temperatures and severe chemical environments makes them great choices for manufacturing components subjected to extreme conditions [10].

***Author for Correspondence**
Chadetrik Rout

[1] Assistant Professor, Department of Civil Engineering, Maharishi Markandeshwar Engineering College, Maharishi Markandeshwar (Deemed to be University), Mullana, Ambala, Haryana, India
[2] Associate Professor, Department of Civil Engineering, Maharishi Markandeshwar Engineering College, Maharishi Markandeshwar (Deemed to be University), Mullana, Ambala, Haryana, India

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From an environmental standpoint, geopolymers can assist in addressing the combined concerns of waste management and climate change by reducing reliance on virgin resources and cutting GHG gas emissions associated with typical cement manufacturing [11]. Geopolymers also support circular economy concept by converting waste into a useful resource [12]. As research continues, with continuous efforts aimed at improving their characteristics, discovering new source materials, and scaling up manufacturing techniques for commercial uses [13]. Collaborations among academia, business, and government institutions strive to further develop and standardize geopolymer use in many industries, speeding uptake and realizing their full potential as a sustainable alternative to traditional materials. Therefore, this study aimed to explore various applications of geopolymers to reduce environmental deterioration, promote sustainable resource management, and contribute to global efforts to reduce climate change impacts.

Environmental Challenges and Demand for Sustainable Materials

The utilization of natural and waste precursors, along with environmentally friendly alkali metal hydroxides, offers numerous advantages in conserving natural resources, reducing energy consumption, minimizing waste, and reducing GHG emissions [14]. Table 1 summarises some key justifications for employing geopolymers.

STRUCTURE AND COMPOSITION OF GEOPOLYMERS

Geopolymers are essentially made up of an amorphous N-A-S-H (Na_2O-Al_2O_3-SiO_2-H_2O) gel, which comprises the primary structure [19]. This gel may also contain zeolitic phases, depending on its composition and synthesis circumstances. Geopolymers may be made from many aluminosilicate source materials, such as fly ash, metakaolin, blast furnace slag, etc. The geopolymer's particular composition can be determined by the source material and activator utilized during the synthesis. Geopolymers and zeolites have certain chemical similarities, however, they differ in microstructure. Geopolymers are predominantly amorphous, whereas zeolites are crystalline [20]. This structural difference causes variances in characteristics and applications. Based on the chemical composition geopolymers can be classified into four types e.g., sialates, phosphates, ferro-sialate, and organic-inorganic [21]. Table 2 summarises the main polymeric chains formed by common reagents with their advantages and drawbacks for each kind of geopolymer.

Aluminosilicate Precursors

Geopolymers, which are inorganic polymers noted for their exceptional strength and fire resistance, rely heavily on aluminium silicate precursors [22]. These precursors are commonly obtained from industrial wastes such as fly ash or metakaolin, giving geopolymers a more ecologically benign alternative to regular cement [23]. Aluminosilicate precursors can be classed as aluminosilicates or alkali-activated materials (AAMs), and their unique features influence the ultimate geopolymer qualities [24]. As research advances, these adaptable precursors are finding new uses in building, fireproofing, and even biomedical engineering, demonstrating their promise for making sustainable and high-performance materials in the future.

Alkaline Activators

Alkaline activators are important components in the manufacture of geopolymers and other alkali-activated materials [25]. These very alkaline solutions, usually sodium or potassium-based, are essential for dissolving and polymerizing the aluminosilicate precursors [26]. The kind and concentration of alkaline activator may have a considerable impact on geopolymer's characteristics, including setting time, strength development, and durability [27]. To optimize the geopolymerization process, variables such as the activator's pH, modulus, and cation type are carefully selected [28]. Ongoing research looks at novel alkaline activators and formulations to improve the performance and sustainability of these alternative binder systems. Proper selection and use of alkaline activators are important for producing high-quality geopolymers [29].

Table 1. Reasons for using Sustainable Geopolymer Materials.

S N.	Reasons for use	Source
1	Reduce carbon footprint and waste generation	[15]
2	Using industrial waste materials as alternatives to traditional cement conserves natural resources.	[16]
3	Increased durability and resistance to harsh conditions, increase the life of structures.	[17]
4	Cost-effectiveness owing to the utilization of waste materials and possible savings in maintenance and repairs.	[11]
5	Meet the sustainability requirements and rules imposed by governments and international organizations.	[18]

Table 2. Types of Geopolymers with their Chemical Composition, Advantages and Limitations.

S N.	Type	Chemical constituents	Advantages	Limitations
1	Sialates	-SiO_2 -Al_2O_3	- Reduce carbon footprint - Exhibit excellent durability -Versatility in nature -Fire resistance -High compressive strength -Cost effective due to less maintenance	-Complex synthesis process -Compatibility issues -High initial cost -Uncertainty in their long-term performance
2	Phosphates	-Al-O-P-O -P-O-Si-O-P-O -P-O-Si-O-Al-O-P-O -P-O-P-O	-Excellent strength and durability -Rapid setting time -Elevated fire resistance -Lessen carbon footprint	-Susceptible to water absorption leads to water pollution -Poor mechanical properties -More expensive
3	Ferro-sialate	-Fe-O-Si-O-Al-O	-High compressive and flexural strength -Excellent durability against chemical attack and weathering -Emits lower CO_2 -Reduce the risk of cracking -Versatility	-Complexity of Synthesis -Durability not yet fully understood -Require specialized knowledge, skills, and equipment -Lack of established standards, codes, etc. for use
4	Organic-inorganic	-SiO_2 -Al_2O_3 -Fe_2O_3 -CaO -MgO -Acrylic acid	-Greater durability and strength -Reduce maintenance costs -Increase structural integrity -Lower carbon footprint -Resistance to chemical corrosion -Faster curing times	-Limited availability and accessibility to certain regions -High production cost -Required specific raw materials and processing conditions -Durability concerns are still being under study -Limited technical expertise -Lack of recognized standards, codes, and regulations for use

** Long term advantages are still under study and subject to field/practical applicability*

Geopolymerization Process

Geopolymerization is a chemical process that converts aluminosilicate precursors into inorganic, 3-D polymeric structures [30]. This process begins when the precursor material dissolves in an alkaline solution, such as sodium or potassium silicate. This dissolution produces aluminium and silicon ions, which then polycondensate to create a rigid, amorphous aluminosilicate gel. As the gel polymerizes and hardens, it acquires geopolymer-specific features such as high compressive strength, minimal shrinkage, and great fire and chemical resistance. The geopolymerization parameters, such as curing time and temperature, may be adjusted to get the required material properties [31].

ADVANTAGES OF USE OF GEOPOLYMERS

Geopolymers, which are chemically bound to clay minerals, enable quick strength development, sustainability, and better qualities, making them a sustainable alternative to Portland cement concrete. The overall benefits of geopolymers (Figure 1) make them a sustainable and innovative option for the construction sector, helping them to change to a more resource-efficient and circular built environment. Moreover, the advantages of the use of specific geopolymers are presented in Table 2.

APPLICATIONS OF GEOPOLYMERS

Several properties make geopolymers suitable and even preferable for a broad range of industrial applications, such as geopolymer resins and binders, geopolymer cement & concrete, clay bricks, etc. Some of the major applications are presented in Table 3.

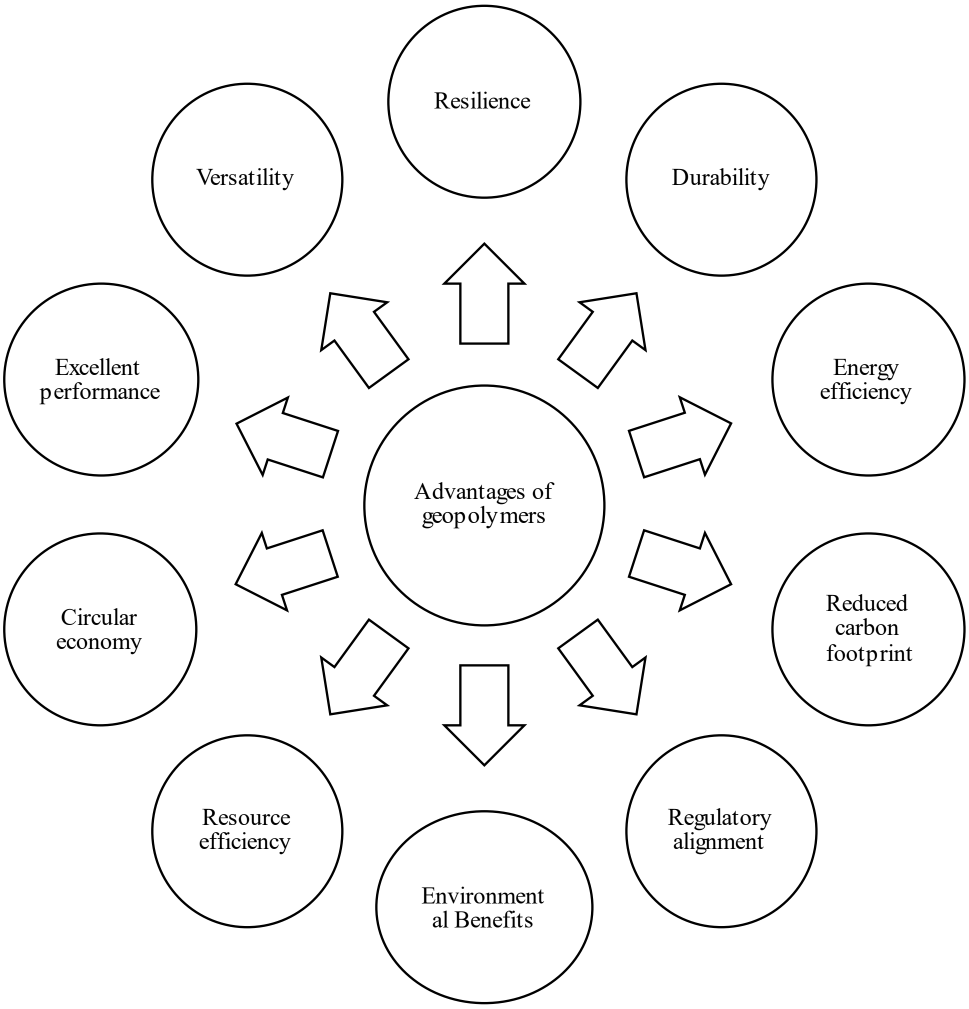

Figure 1. Advantages of geopolymers.

Table 3. Applications of Geopolymers.

S N.	Application	Description	Reference
1	Construction materials	Used as a substitute for conventional cement in concrete, bricks, and tiles.	[32]
2	Infrastructure	Used in infrastructure projects because of its high strength and longevity.	[33,34]
3	Protective coatings	Used as protective coatings on maritime and industrial constructions.	[33]
4	Thermal insulation	Used in thermal insulation applications, such as wall panels.	[32]
5	Waste encapsulation and stabilization	Used to encapsulate and stabilize hazardous and radioactive waste.	[35]
6	Fire and heat-resistant materials	Used to make fire and heat-resistant materials for various applications.	[34]

ENVIRONMENTAL AND SUSTAINABILITY ASPECTS

Geopolymers provide substantial environmental benefits over ordinary Portland cement. They need less energy to produce, which reduces GHG emissions significantly. Furthermore, they may use industrial leftovers (wastes) as raw materials, reducing waste and encouraging resource conservation. The environmental and sustainability aspects of geopolymers are discussed under three sub-headings such as life cycle assessment (LCA), circular economy, and regulatory frameworks and standardization.

Table 4. LCA Aspects of Geopolymers vs Traditional Cement.

LCA aspect	Geopolymers	Traditional cement	Source
Raw materials	-Utilize industrial waste and by-products (e.g., fly ash, slag) as precursors -Reduced consumption of virgin raw materials	Extraction and processing of virgin raw materials (e.g., limestone, clay)	[36,37]
Energy consumption	-Lower energy requirements during manufacturing process -Potential for using renewable energy sources	High energy-intensive manufacturing process, mostly reliant on fossil fuels.	[38,39]
GHG emissions	Significantly reduce CO_2 emissions as compared to traditional cement production	Significant CO_2 emissions during cement manufacture are a key component of the global carbon footprint.	[40,41]
Waste management	Utilizing industrial waste and byproducts as precursors can reduce landfill dumping.	Waste generated and disposed of during cement manufacture	[42,43]
Transport	Potential for shorter transit distances due to the usage of locally accessible precursors.	Cement manufacturing is frequently centralized, resulting in longer transportation routes for raw materials and finished products.	[44,45]
Durability	Excellent resistance to chemical attack, fire, and weathering, resulting in a prolonged service life.	Lower resilience to external stimuli necessitates more frequent maintenance and replacement.	[46]
Recyclability	- May be recycled and reused in many applications.	Cement-based materials have low recyclability and often end up in landfills.	[37,47]

Life Cycle Assessment (LCA) of Geopolymers

LCA examines a product's environmental implications across its whole life cycle, from raw material extraction to disposal. Studies revealed that geopolymer concrete has a lower environmental effect than standard Portland cement concrete, particularly in terms of GHG emissions. Considering previous studies on LCAs a comparison was made (Geopolymers *vs* Traditional cement) for a better understanding of LCA aspects (Table 4).

Circular Economy

Geopolymer binders, produced *via* the harmonic combination of aluminosilicate-rich materials and alkaline solutions, are the masters of a new age in building and infrastructure. They are formed from the ashes of industrial byproducts, such as fly ash, slag, metakaolin, etc. which were formerly considered as waste. These abandoned resources are converted into the foundation of a greener tomorrow through the alkali activation process. This ingenious approach not only eliminates the need for fresh raw materials but also minimizes the energy usage and carbon footprint associated with typical cement manufacture. Geopolymers' versatility enables simple disassembly and reuse, reflecting the concepts of a real circular economy [48]. They may be smoothly reincorporated into new geopolymer compositions, resulting in a harmonic closed loop of material cycling. Furthermore, their usage in buildings and infrastructure can increase material lifespan while lowering waste production and resource extraction [1].

Regulatory Frameworks and Standardization

Regulatory agencies throughout the world are fine-tuning their tools to promote geopolymer adoption. National and international standards are being developed to specify the composition, performance characteristics, and testing processes for these novel binders. The standardization procedure enables the accurate assessment of geopolymer characteristics, assuring compliance with safety and quality criteria. Furthermore, regulatory frameworks are being developed to promote the use of geopolymers in building and infrastructure projects [11]. The work performance is led by policies that promote the valorization of industrial waste, reduce carbon emissions, and stimulate the use of sustainable materials. As the regulatory balance acquires speed, geopolymers will be widely accepted and implemented throughout the sector. This harmonic partnership among inventors, politicians, and policymakers will result in a work of development, with sustainable materials taking center stage in the building of a better tomorrow.

CHALLENGES AND FUTURE PROSPECTS

One of the most significant technical difficulties is the variability of the aluminosilicate precursors employed in geopolymer synthesis. The variable content and quality of industrial byproducts, such as fly ash and slag, might result in variations in the final geopolymer characteristics. Ongoing research focuses on initiating standardized techniques for material characterization and mix design optimization to enable more consistent and predictable performance [6]. Another technological problem is long-term endurance, especially in adverse environments/climates. Geopolymer's microstructural development, chemical resistance, and dimensional stability are being thoroughly studied by researchers to find techniques for increasing their durability and other properties. The complex interaction of alkali activators and aluminosilicate precursors is also under study [24]. Researchers are also experimenting with new activator formulas, curing regimes, and admixture additives to fine-tune the reaction kinetics and increase geopolymer workability, setting time, strength, etc.

Scalability and Commercialization

One of the most important factors for scaling up geopolymer manufacturing is the availability and consistency of aluminosilicate precursors including fly ash, volcanic ash, slag, and metakaolin. Researchers and industry partners are working together to discover dependable sources, optimize logistical arrangements, and create standardized processing processes to ensure a consistent supply of raw materials. Equally important is the development of large-scale production technologies that can mimic the laboratory's controlled conditions and exact mix designs. This includes designing and optimizing specialized equipment, mixing methods, quality control techniques, etc. to ensure that geopolymer products function as expected. As previously noted, commercializing geopolymers needs the harmonization of regulatory frameworks and industry standards. This carefully planned method guarantees that geopolymer-based products can satisfy the requisite safety, performance, and sustainability standards, opening the road for mainstream acceptance and adoption.

Barriers to Adoption and Strategies for Advancement

One of the most significant impediments to adoption is lack of general awareness and understanding of geopolymers among construction industry stakeholders [49]. The technological difficulties and unfamiliarity with this evolving technology might cause reluctance and resistance to change. Strategies for overcoming this barrier include focused educational efforts, highlighting successful case studies, and building collaborative collaborations among researchers, manufacturers, and end users. The second key impediment is the idea that geopolymer-based materials have higher prices than typical cement-based products. However, this short-term approach overlooks geopolymers' long-term advantages, such as decreased environmental impact, increased durability, and the possibility of material recycling and reuse. Addressing these hurdles demands a comprehensive approach that quantifies life-cycle cost reductions while emphasizing the value proposition of sustainable building. Regulatory and legislative frameworks can potentially impede the broad implementation of geopolymers. The absence of consistent standards, procedures, and incentives may restrict industry participants' trust and desire to invest in this technology [50]. Strategies for overcoming these obstacles include active interaction with legislators, establishment of robust certification schemes, introduction of well-cut incentives, etc. to encourage the use of sustainable geopolymer construction materials.

CONCLUSION

Geopolymer binders, produced by the ideal mix of aluminosilicate-rich materials and alkaline solutions, are motivating transformation in how we build and maintain infrastructure. They can use alkali activation to valorize industrial waste and their byproducts, reducing the need for virgin raw materials and their associated environmental consequences. Their exceptional mechanical qualities, durability, and resistance to various environmental conditions make them more desirable than traditional cement-based materials. Geopolymers hold circular economy concepts since they are designed for simple disassembly and reuse, supporting the "reduce, reuse, and recycle" approach. Furthermore, combining recycled geopolymers into new compositions builds a closed loop in which waste is constantly converted into beneficial resources. As regulatory frameworks and standardization processes gain traction, geopolymer adoption is projected to grow. Researchers, legislators, and industry partners are collaborating to fine-tune the orchestra, overcoming technological constraints and commercialization barriers.

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