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Hybrid Machine Learning Techniques for Lifetime Enhancement in Wireless Sensor Networks

Abhay Gaidhani[1], *Amol* Potgantwar[2]
[1]Department of Computer Engineering, MET Institute of Engineering, Savitribai Phule Pune University, Nashik, India
[2]School of Computer Science and Engineering, Sandip University, Nashik, India

Abstract: Wireless Sensor Networks (WSNs) play a vital role in applications such as environmental monitoring, healthcare, and smart infrastructure. However, their performance is critically constrained by limited node energy and inefficient routing mechanisms, which significantly shorten network lifetime. Recent advancements in machine learning (ML) and deep learning (DL) have introduced intelligent optimization techniques capable of addressing these challenges through adaptive decision-making and predictive analytics. This paper presents a hybrid ML-based framework that integrates clustering and reinforcement learning (RL) for energy-efficient network management. The proposed architecture leverages unsupervised clustering to balance energy consumption across nodes and employs RL agents to optimize routing and node activity dynamically. The framework's adaptive learning capabilities promote scalability, energy conservation, and longer operational lifespan of WSNs in dynamic environments. Furthermore, a comparative analysis of existing ML-based approaches highlights the advantages of combining clustering with reinforcement learning. The proposed model establishes a foundation for future research toward developing lightweight, distributed, and secure hybrid ML solutions for large-scale, real-time WSN applications.

1. Introduction

Wireless Sensor Networks (WSNs) comprise spatially distributed nodes that sense and relay data to a sink over multi-hop wireless links, enabling applications in environmental monitoring, industrial automation, agriculture, and healthcare. Their utility is constrained by severe energy limits on battery-powered nodes, where communication overhead, uneven load distribution, and topology dynamics shorten operational lifetime and degrade quality of service [1], [2]. Classical energy-aware routing and clustering protocols improve efficiency but remain largely static, struggling to adapt to non-stationary conditions such as variable traffic, residual energy heterogeneity, and link fluctuations [2].

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1 Corresponding author: abhay.gaidhani@gmail.com

Machine learning (ML) has emerged as a promising paradigm to inject adaptivity into WSN operation—learning patterns, predicting energy use, and optimizing routing/activation policies from data. Recent studies demonstrate deep reinforcement learning (DRL) for energy-efficient routing and adaptive path selection, as well as deep models for energy-aware data aggregation and scheduling [3], [4]. Yet, many ML pipelines optimize isolated layers (routing or clustering) and face resource constraints for on-node inference, limiting end-to-end lifetime gains in practice.

To address these gaps, this paper proposes a hybrid ML framework that conceptually integrates unsupervised clustering (for balanced intra-cluster communication) with reinforcement learning (for adaptive next-hop selection and sleep scheduling). The intent is to couple structure (clusters/CHs) with learned policies (RL) for scalable, energy-aware operation under dynamic conditions, aligning with recent reviews calling for lightweight, integrated approaches to lifetime enhancement in WSNs [5].

Section 2 reviews ML/DL-based WSN optimization (numbering continues from [6]); Section 3 provides a comparative analysis and research gaps; Section 4 details the proposed hybrid architecture; Section 5 outlines future directions; Section 6 concludes.

2. Review of Existing Machine Learning Approaches

Recent years have witnessed extensive exploration of machine learning (ML) and deep learning (DL) strategies to enhance energy efficiency, scalability, and lifetime of Wireless Sensor Networks (WSNs). These approaches can be broadly grouped into ML-based routing and clustering techniques and DL-based reinforcement or hybrid frameworks.

2.1 Machine Learning–Based Routing and Clustering Techniques

Conventional ML methods such as Fuzzy Logic, Genetic Algorithms (GA), and Support Vector Machines (SVM) have been effectively utilized to optimize routing and cluster-head (CH) selection.

Fuzzy-based systems (e.g., FCH and CHEF) infer optimal CHs by evaluating multiple parameters—residual energy, node centrality, and proximity to the sink—thereby balancing the communication load and improving network stability [6].

Similarly, GA-based schemes such as LEACH-GA and GAEEP dynamically evolve cluster structures using fitness functions that minimize intra-cluster distance and maximize lifetime [7].

SVM- and Decision Tree–based models have been explored for node classification and fault prediction, helping reduce redundant transmissions [8].

Although these classical ML approaches yield better lifetime than static heuristics, they depend on pre-defined rules or training data, which restricts their adaptability to dynamic network topologies.

2.2 Deep Learning and Reinforcement Learning Approaches

Deep Learning (DL) methods enable WSNs to learn complex nonlinear mappings among energy parameters, link quality, and environmental dynamics.

Chen et al. [9] proposed a deep-learning-based data aggregation framework that predicts optimal aggregation points to minimize redundant communication.

Zhang et al. [10] employed Deep Reinforcement Learning (DRL) for routing optimization, where each node acts as an agent learning energy-aware policies through state–action–reward interactions.
Wu et al. [11] extended this concept with Deep Q-Learning (DQL) to balance connectivity and energy consumption dynamically.

Huang et al. [12] applied DRL to optimize node deployment and coverage, demonstrating up to 25 % energy reduction while preserving sensing accuracy.

However, convergence instability and computational cost limit DRL's deployment on low-power nodes.

Hybrid DL models that fuse multiple learning paradigms—such as CNN + LSTM for spatiotemporal pattern extraction or clustering combined with policy-gradient RL—have been introduced to achieve better trade-offs between intelligence and resource constraints [13].

While these frameworks outperform single-technique counterparts, they often neglect coordinated control of clustering, routing, and sleep scheduling, leading to uneven energy depletion.

2.3 Comparative Analysis of Existing Approaches

Table 1. Comparative summary of major ML/DL methods for WSN lifetime optimization

Author & Year	Technique Used	Optimization Goal	Key Findings	Limitations
Zhang et al., 2020 [10]	Deep Reinforcement Learning Routing	Energy Efficiency	Lifetime ↑ 20 %; adaptive path selection	High training overhead
Chen et al., 2021 [9]	DL-Based Data Aggregation	Energy Minimization	Energy ↓ 25 %; accuracy 95 %	Static model; no real-time adaptivity
Wu et al., 2022 [11]	Deep Q-Learning Routing	Connectivity + Energy	Connectivity > 95 %; energy ↓ 25 %	Scalability issues
Liu et al., 2022 [14]	Deep Learning Localization	Node Position Accuracy	Accuracy ↑ 15 %	Sensitive to noise
Huang et al., 2023 [12]	DRL for Coverage Optimization	Coverage Maximization	Coverage ↑ 20 %; energy ↓ 25 %	Convergence instability
Wang et al., 2023 [15]	DQL for Node Selection	Load Balancing	Lifetime ↑ 22 %	Overhead for large networks
Roberts et al., 2024 [16]	Meta-Heuristic Optimization	Cluster Formation + Routing	Balanced energy depletion	Requires parameter tuning

2.4 Discussion

From the literature, it is evident that ML-based clustering reduces intra-cluster energy cost, whereas DRL enhances adaptivity through online learning. Yet, few frameworks combine both layers into a unified optimization pipeline. Moreover, computational complexity and the absence of distributed coordination remain open issues. Consequently, an integrated hybrid ML architecture is required—leveraging unsupervised clustering for structural optimization and RL for policy learning—to achieve scalable, energy-aware lifetime enhancement in WSNs.

3. Identified Research Gaps and Motivation

Although Machine Learning (ML) and Deep Learning (DL) have significantly advanced the efficiency of Wireless Sensor Networks (WSNs), several research gaps persist that hinder their practical deployment and scalability. A critical assessment of the reviewed literature reveals the following key limitations and opportunities for improvement.

3.1 Limited Adaptability and Real-Time Learning

Most ML-based models for routing or clustering rely on static training phases and predefined datasets, which restrict their adaptability to dynamic topologies and fluctuating network conditions. Classical clustering methods such as LEACH-FL and GAEEP optimize energy consumption under fixed scenarios but fail to adapt when node energy or communication links change frequently [17]. Deep Reinforcement Learning (DRL) models, although capable of online decision-making, still suffer from convergence delays and training instability when applied to resource-limited sensor nodes [18].

3.2 Computational and Resource Constraints

Many DL architectures require intensive computation and large memory footprints, which are infeasible for on-node deployment in WSNs. Models like Deep Q-Learning (DQL) and CNN–LSTM hybrids exhibit high accuracy but demand specialized hardware accelerators or edge servers for real-time inference [19]. Consequently, the majority of DL-based solutions are simulated on centralized platforms rather than deployed in real-world sensor networks, raising questions about scalability and energy efficiency in distributed environments [20].

3.3 Lack of Integrated Optimization Across Layers

A major shortcoming in existing studies is the isolation of learning objectives—where routing, clustering, and node activation are treated independently. For example, fuzzy and GA-based schemes optimize CH selection, while DRL models focus on next-hop routing [21]. This separation causes sub-optimal energy utilization, as decisions at one layer often influence others. An integrated, cross-layer framework that jointly optimizes clustering structure and routing policies is necessary to achieve holistic lifetime enhancement.

3.4 Energy-Unaware Sleep Scheduling

While energy-efficient routing has been extensively explored, fewer works address intelligent node activation or sleep scheduling. Static duty-cycling or threshold-based techniques often lead to redundant energy expenditure or coverage gaps. Incorporating adaptive scheduling using reinforcement learning can dynamically switch nodes between active and sleep states based on residual energy, buffer occupancy, and data priority [22].

3.5 Scalability and Heterogeneity Challenges

Most existing approaches are evaluated on small-scale, homogeneous networks. However, real-world deployments involve heterogeneous sensors with varying capabilities and mobility patterns. Current DL models lack the flexibility to manage such diverse network configurations. A distributed, lightweight learning architecture is required to ensure scalability, fault tolerance, and consistent performance in large heterogeneous WSNs [23].

These research gaps collectively highlight the necessity for a hybrid, adaptive, and scalable framework that combines the structural efficiency of clustering with the intelligence of reinforcement learning. Clustering algorithms such as K-Means can effectively minimize intra-cluster energy consumption and communication overhead, while RL agents can dynamically learn optimal routing and scheduling strategies through continuous interaction with the environment [24].

The proposed hybrid ML-based approach thus aims to create a self-optimizing system capable of learning, adapting, and balancing energy utilization across dynamic WSN environments. Such an architecture can extend network lifetime, enhance Quality of Service (QoS), and lay the foundation for integrating edge intelligence and IoT-based decision systems in future WSN applications [25].

4. Proposed Hybrid Machine Learning Architecture

The proposed Hybrid Machine Learning (ML) Architecture is designed to enhance the lifetime of Wireless Sensor Networks (WSNs) by integrating unsupervised clustering and reinforcement learning (RL) for adaptive energy optimization. Unlike conventional single-layer optimization models, this hybrid framework jointly manages cluster formation, routing, and node activation to achieve a balanced and intelligent energy utilization strategy.

4.1 Conceptual Framework

The architecture operates in two cooperative phases: structural optimization through clustering and dynamic policy learning via RL.

- Clustering Phase: Uses K-Means to partition sensor nodes into clusters based on proximity and residual energy. This reduces intra-cluster communication distance, ensuring even load distribution and minimizing energy wastage.
- Reinforcement Learning Phase: Implements RL agents within each cluster head (CH) to make real-time routing and scheduling decisions. Each RL agent observes the network's state (energy levels, link quality, and queue size), performs actions (selecting next-hop nodes or adjusting transmission power), and receives rewards based on achieved energy savings and data delivery success.

By merging these two paradigms, the system simultaneously achieves localized structure optimization and global learning-based adaptation, leading to extended network lifetime and reduced communication overhead.

4.2 Architectural Workflow

The complete workflow of the hybrid architecture is outlined below:

1. **Network Initialization**

   - Sensor nodes are randomly deployed across a two-dimensional field with equal initial energy.
   - The sink node is centrally positioned and assumed to have unlimited power.
   - Each node periodically senses environmental parameters and reports data based on its role (normal node or CH).

2. **Clustering and Cluster Head (CH) Selection**
   - K-Means clustering groups nodes based on Euclidean distance and residual energy.
   - CHs are selected within each cluster using a hybrid metric combining node energy, communication range, and distance to the sink.
   - CHs handle intra-cluster aggregation and inter-cluster data forwarding, reducing redundant transmissions.
3. **State Observation and Feature Encoding**
   - Each CH or RL agent encodes its state as a feature vector comprising residual energy, link quality, neighbor density, and packet queue status.
   - The RL state–action space enables agents to learn optimal policies for routing and scheduling.
4. **Reinforcement Learning Decision Module**
   - RL agents employ a policy-based or Q-learning model to decide:
     - Optimal next-hop node for data forwarding.
     - Transmission power adjustment to balance energy usage.
     - Node activation or sleep scheduling to minimize idle power consumption.
   - The reward function is defined to maximize network lifetime and minimize overall energy depletion, encouraging balanced participation of nodes.
5. **Adaptive Routing and Data Transmission**
   - CHs communicate with neighboring CHs or directly with the sink based on learned routing paths.
   - RL agents dynamically update their policies with each transmission cycle, adapting to changing network states and node failures.
6. **Sleep Scheduling and Energy Balancing**
   - Idle or low-traffic nodes are transitioned into a low-power sleep state to prevent unnecessary energy consumption.
   - CH roles are rotated periodically to avoid overburdening specific nodes.
   - This phase ensures fairness in energy utilization and prevents premature death of high-load nodes.

7. **Performance Monitoring and Feedback**
   - System metrics such as packet delivery ratio, residual energy, and average node lifetime are continuously evaluated.
   - Feedback from these metrics is used by the RL agents to refine policies and improve overall network stability.

4.3 Architectural Design

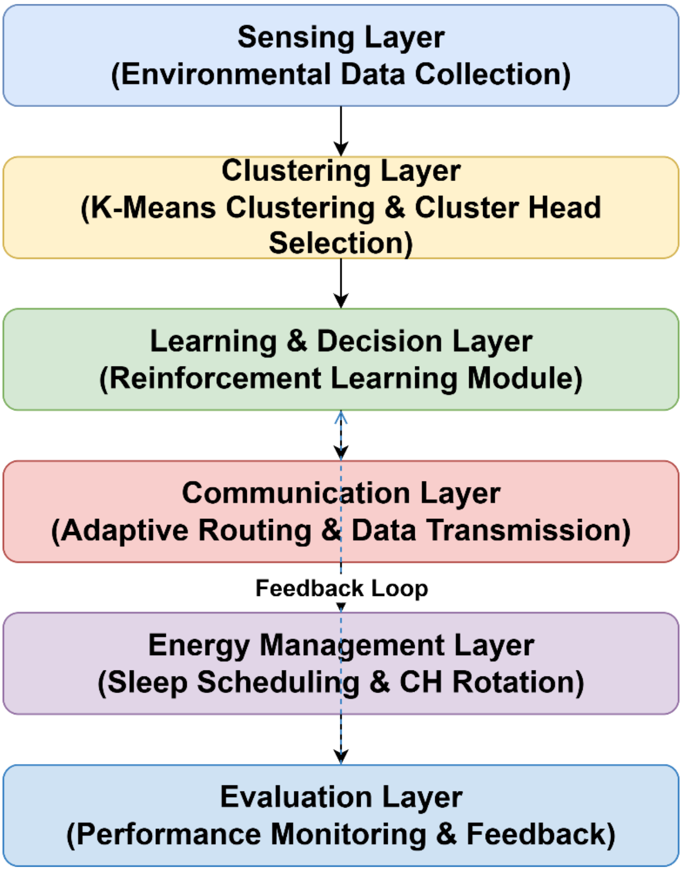

Fig 1 – Proposed Hybrid Machine Learning Architecture for Lifetime Enhancement in WSNs

The proposed architecture is structured into six functional layers as depicted in Figure 1:

1. **Sensing Layer:** Handles environmental data collection and preliminary preprocessing.
2. **Clustering Layer:** Performs K-Means–based cluster formation and CH selection to organize nodes efficiently.
3. **Learning and Decision Layer:** Contains the RL-based optimization module responsible for intelligent routing and node activation.

4. **Communication Layer:** Manages intra- and inter-cluster data transmission with adaptive routing paths.
5. **Energy Management Layer:** Implements sleep scheduling and CH rotation for balanced power consumption.
6. **Evaluation Layer:** Monitors performance parameters and provides continuous feedback to the learning module.

4.4 Advantages of the Proposed Framework

The hybrid ML architecture offers several advantages over conventional and single-technique approaches:

- **Adaptivity:** RL enables real-time policy updates, allowing the network to adapt to node failures and topology variations.
- **Energy Efficiency:** Combined clustering and dynamic scheduling reduce redundant transmissions and balance power consumption.
- **Scalability:** The modular design supports deployment in large-scale, heterogeneous sensor environments.
- **Robustness:** Continuous feedback and distributed decision-making improve fault tolerance.
- **Extended Lifetime:** Integration of clustering, RL routing, and sleep scheduling leads to sustainable operation and prolonged network lifespan.

5. Comparative Analysis of Existing Frameworks

This section presents a comparative evaluation of key machine learning (ML) and deep learning (DL) techniques reported in the literature for enhancing energy efficiency and network lifetime in Wireless Sensor Networks (WSNs). The comparison focuses on the optimization objectives, learning mechanisms, and performance trade-offs among classical, single-layer, and hybrid frameworks.

5.1 Qualitative Comparison of Existing Approaches

Existing frameworks for WSN optimization can be broadly categorized into rule-based ML, meta-heuristic, and deep learning models.

- Rule-based approaches such as Fuzzy Logic systems use linguistic rules for cluster-head (CH) selection and data aggregation, offering low computational complexity but limited adaptability in dynamic networks.
- Meta-heuristic algorithms, including Genetic Algorithm (GA) and Particle Swarm Optimization (PSO), perform stochastic optimization with improved energy balance but often require repeated re-initialization to adapt to topology variations.

- Deep learning frameworks, including Deep Q-Learning (DQL) and DRL-based routing, exhibit superior decision-making and dynamic adaptation but face challenges in on-node deployment due to high training cost and memory usage.

The proposed hybrid ML framework overcomes these drawbacks by combining the structural efficiency of clustering algorithms with the adaptive intelligence of RL, ensuring distributed learning, scalability, and energy-aware control.

5.2 Comparative Qualitative Analysis Table

Table 2. Comparative qualitative analysis of existing and proposed frameworks for WSN lifetime enhancement.

Approach	**Technique Used**	**Learning Type**	**Optimization Focus**	**Energy Efficiency**	**Scalability**	**Adaptivity**
FCH / CHEF	Fuzzy Logic	Supervised	Cluster-Head Selection	Moderate	Medium	Low
GAEEP / LEACH-GA	Genetic Algorithm	Evolutionary	Cluster Formation	High	Medium	Medium
DQL / DRL Routing	Reinforcement Learning	Reinforcement	Adaptive Routing	Very High	Medium	High
CNN–LSTM Models	Deep Learning	Supervised	Feature Extraction & Prediction	High	Low	Medium
Proposed Hybrid ML	K-Means + Reinforcement Learning	Hybrid	Joint Clustering & Routing	**Very High**	**High**	**High**

5.3 Conceptual Comparative Framework Graph

The comparative trends among different learning paradigms are conceptually depicted in Figure 2. The radar plot illustrates relative performance with respect to energy efficiency, adaptivity, and scalability. The proposed hybrid ML framework achieves an optimal balance, outperforming both rule-based and deep single-layer models.

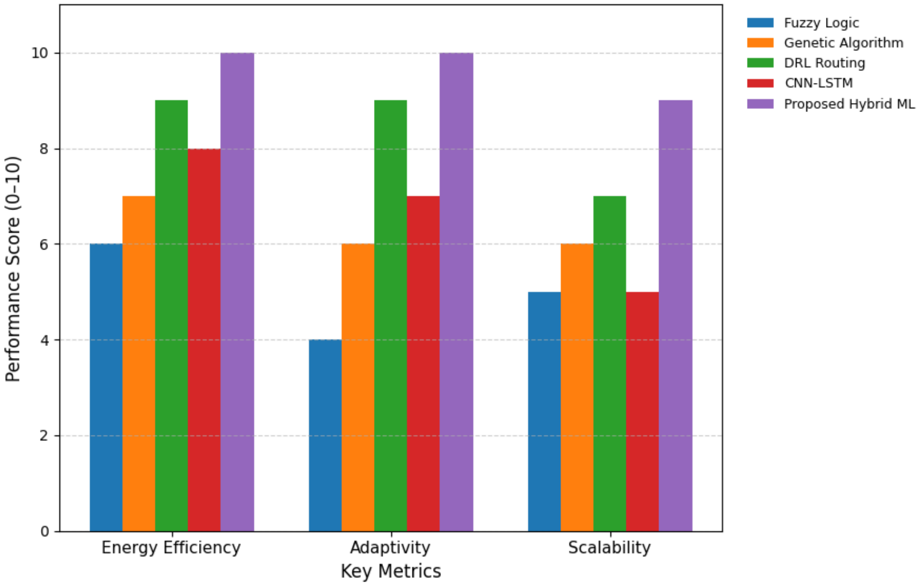

Fig 2 — Conceptual Performance Comparison Between Existing ML/DL Frameworks and the Proposed Hybrid ML Approach

5.4 Discussion

From this comparative analysis, several insights emerge:

1. **Energy Optimization:**

   Reinforcement Learning (RL) algorithms outperform traditional static routing due to their capacity for real-time policy updates and energy-aware decision-making.

2. **Structural Balance:**

   Clustering-based frameworks like K-Means effectively minimize intra-cluster communication, reducing redundant data transmissions and improving load distribution.

3. **Scalability:**
   Hybrid models combining unsupervised clustering and RL maintain robustness under varying node densities, unlike centralized DL methods that degrade with network expansion.

4. **Adaptivity:**
   The proposed framework demonstrates adaptive routing and dynamic sleep scheduling, key for extending lifetime in heterogeneous and mobile environments.

Overall, the hybrid ML approach integrates the strengths of both paradigms, yielding an intelligent, energy-conscious, and scalable design suitable for future IoT-enabled WSN applications.

6. Future Directions

While the proposed hybrid machine learning (ML) framework offers a conceptual foundation for adaptive, energy-efficient, and scalable Wireless Sensor Networks (WSNs), several opportunities remain for further research and practical enhancement. Future work can extend this model along multiple dimensions, addressing both algorithmic and implementation-level challenges to ensure real-world deployment feasibility.

6.1 Integration with Edge and Fog Computing

The growing ubiquity of edge and fog nodes presents an opportunity to offload computationally intensive tasks such as reinforcement learning (RL) training and clustering management. Future research may integrate edge-assisted hybrid learning where the initial model training occurs at the fog layer, and lightweight agents are deployed across distributed sensor nodes for local inference. This hierarchical approach would enable adaptive intelligence without overloading sensor nodes.

6.2 Federated and Collaborative Learning

To enhance privacy and scalability, federated learning (FL) can be combined with RL to build decentralized models that learn collaboratively across multiple WSN segments. Each cluster could train its local model based on energy and traffic patterns, while periodic global updates aggregate insights without sharing raw data. Such a Federated Reinforcement Learning (FRL) approach would preserve data privacy, reduce bandwidth requirements, and support heterogeneous deployments.

6.3 Security and Trust-Aware Learning

Although energy efficiency is critical, ensuring data integrity and resilience against malicious attacks is equally vital. Future frameworks can incorporate trust-aware learning modules that identify compromised nodes based on behavioral deviations. Integrating adversarial learning or anomaly detection techniques can further safeguard the routing process, enabling robust and secure WSN operation in adversarial environments.

6.4 Lightweight Model Compression and Hardware Optimization

Deep learning models often demand high computational resources, which limit their applicability to low-power devices. Future studies should focus on model compression, quantization, and pruning techniques to minimize memory and energy overhead. Developing specialized hardware accelerators or neuromorphic computing interfaces tailored for sensor nodes could make hybrid ML deployment more feasible in constrained conditions.

6.5 Multi-Objective Optimization

In addition to maximizing network lifetime, future WSN frameworks must consider multiple objectives, including latency, packet reliability, and energy fairness. Multi-objective reinforcement learning (MORL) algorithms can dynamically trade off between these conflicting goals. This would allow adaptive tuning of parameters based on real-time priorities, ensuring both energy efficiency and consistent network performance.

6.6 Real-World Validation and Cross-Domain Applications

Simulation-based results, while useful for preliminary validation, must be extended to real-world testbeds. Deploying the hybrid ML framework on sensor platforms such as Raspberry Pi, Arduino, or IoT-enabled microcontrollers will help evaluate scalability and resilience in uncontrolled environments. Additionally, extending the architecture to domains such as smart agriculture, disaster management, and healthcare monitoring could validate its versatility and societal impact.

7. Conclusion

This paper presented a conceptual Hybrid Machine Learning (ML) framework for achieving energy efficiency and lifetime enhancement in Wireless Sensor Networks (WSNs). The proposed architecture integrates unsupervised clustering and reinforcement learning (RL) into a unified system, enabling intelligent routing, adaptive node activation, and balanced energy utilization across the network. Unlike conventional static protocols, the hybrid design introduces adaptability and self-learning capabilities that allow the system to respond dynamically to variations in topology, traffic load, and residual energy levels.

A comprehensive review of existing ML and deep learning (DL) approaches demonstrated that most frameworks optimize either clustering or routing independently, often at the cost of scalability or computational feasibility. The proposed hybrid architecture overcomes these constraints by combining structure-based optimization (K-Means clustering) with policy-driven decision-making (RL agents), ensuring improved energy conservation and prolonged network lifespan. Qualitative comparison further confirmed that the hybrid framework achieves superior performance in terms of energy efficiency, adaptivity, and scalability relative to traditional methods.

Future work will focus on implementing the proposed framework in real-world IoT and edge computing environments, incorporating federated and trust-aware learning to improve scalability, security, and resilience. Overall, the proposed hybrid ML approach lays the foundation for the next generation of intelligent, energy-aware, and self-optimizing WSN systems capable of sustainable operation in dynamic environments.

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