WHAT DO THE SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT GOALS (SDGs) MEAN TO ONE-SIXTH OF THE WORLD’S POPULATION?

The Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) framework adopted by the United Nations replaced the Millennium Development Goals from January 2016. Considering its large population and remarkable economic growth, India plays a pivotal role in the success or failure of the SDGs globally. Critics of these goals argue that they are too wide and ambiguous to make any concrete change.

In this context this policy brief analyzes the following questions – are the lofty ideals of the SDGs relevant in the Indian scenario? What is the current status of India on the sustainable development index? How do we integrate the 17 goals into India’s mainstream development process to create an equal, just and sustainable society?

BACKGROUND – UNDERSTANDING THE TRANSFORMATIVE POTENTIAL OF THE SDGs

The Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) also referred to as the ‘2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development’, are a universal call to action to end poverty, protect the planet, and ensure that all people enjoy peace and prosperity. These 17 Goals build on the successes of the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) while including new focus areas such as climate change, economic inequality, innovation, sustainable consumption, peace and justice, among other priorities. Further, unlike the MDGs, it is applicable to developed as well as developing nations.1

The 17 SDGs – with their 169 targets and 230 indicators –reflect our evolving understanding of the social, economic and environmental linkages that define our development agenda. This comprehensive agenda recognizes that it is no longer sufficient just to focus on economic growth, but on fairer and more equal societies and a safer and more prosperous planet. While many social indicators are positively impacted by economic growth, several indicators – especially on the fronts of health, human rights, civic spaces, and environment – have a weak correlation with GDP.

In fact, at the core of this global 2030 Agenda is the principle of universality – ‘Leave No One Behind’. This principle finds resonance in India as it is similar to the philosophy underlying the Gandhian ideal of “Sarvodaya through Antyodaya” which aims to bring development for all by uplifting the weakest. Further, India’s proclaimed development goal currently is “Sab ka Saath, sab ka Vikas” or “development with all, and for all,” which converges with the stated principles underlying the SDGs and their goals.

CONTEXTUAL ANALYSIS- LOCATING INDIA’S CURRENT STATUS ON SDGS

According to a new index developed by the Sustainable Development Solutions Network (SDSN), India ranks a low 110 out of 149 nations assessed on where they stand with regard to achieving the Sustainable Development Goals.2 Despite being the fastest growing large economy in the world, growing at 7.9 percent in 2015–16,3 the fact remains that such macro-indicators gloss over micro-realities of the nation. The macro-micro dichotomy is evident from the fact that India is home to one of the highest number of billionaires in the world while also having the largest number of poor people in the world. In fact, according to the latest Oxfam briefing report released in January 2017, India’s richest 1 per cent owns 58 per cent of the total wealth in India.

Although, economic growth made a difference to the large middle class, it is yet to ‘trickle down’ to the rural poor, small and marginal farmers, and a vast number of poor and marginalized people including Dalits (scheduled castes) and Adivasis (scheduled tribes), who make up 25 percent of the population. Sixty-nine years after its independence, India is still engaged in a struggle against the ‘unfreedoms’ of poverty, inequality, hunger, illiteracy, unemployment and more. The environment is also under increasing stress and there is a need to strengthen the sustainability dimension to address new and emerging challenges such as unsustainable consumption and production patterns that are rapidly depleting natural resources. Further, the need to effectively mitigate and adapt to climate change, and develop a sustainable urbanization paradigm is of paramount importance.

The SDGs are based on the three pillars of sustainable development which comprise the social, economic and the environmental. Locating Indian development in the context of these three pillars is, therefore, vital.

1 'What are the Sustainable Development Goals’ at http://www.undp.org/content/undp/en/home/sustainable-development-goals.html (last accessed on 13.03.2017)


**ECONOMIC CONTEXT**

As the indicators above show, India has done well on the macroeconomic front, with the Wall Street Journal suggesting that the country has overtaken China as the world’s fastest growing economy. India also replaced China as the top destination for foreign investment (FDI) in 2016. These achievements are commendable given that major global economies are shrinking against the backdrop of a strong US dollar and depressed commodity prices.

A major gap in the Indian growth story has, however, been the phenomenon of jobless growth, which in spite of GDP growth, unemployment levels have been on the rise. It is estimated that a million Indians become eligible to join the workforce every month. The jobless growth story could, hence, turn the demographic dividend into a demographic liability with huge political and social ramifications. The importance of quality education and productive employment has been highlighted in Goals 4 and 8, reflecting their relevance in the sustainability of a country.

Another important facet of the Indian growth story has been that of urban-led growth with big cities contributing disproportionately to GDP compared to the rest of the country. This has led to rapid and unplanned urbanization, causing stress to basic civic amenities. Data collated during the socio-economic caste census in urban areas, ironically shows that though basic amenities like water and sanitation are not available, relative luxuries like phones and refrigerators are available.

**SOCIAL CONTEXT**

The data from Socio-Economic Caste Census (SECC) conducted by the Ministry of Rural Development underlines how the rhetoric of growth belies social realities in rural India. The census takes into account the multi-dimensional aspects of poverty and estimates deprivation in terms of seven parameters including the source of income, the presence of an able and literate adult, and a quality dwelling. SDG 1 calls on countries to end poverty in all its forms everywhere and, hence, acknowledging and measuring multi-dimensional poverty is the first step to its eradication.

The SECC findings on income inequality is stark, with research revealing that in nearly 75% per cent of rural households, the main family earner makes less than Rs.5,000 (US$ 75) per month. The primary income earner makes more than Rs.10,000 (US$ 150) per month in just 8 per cent of households. These extremely low income figures follow from the nature of high levels of informal sector employment in rural India.

On the status of gender equality, India is ranked abysmally low at 114 on the Gender Gap Index (GGI) in the Global Gender Gap Report released by the World Economic Forum (WEF) in 2015. When broken down into components of the GGI, India performs well on political empowerment but is scored as poorly as China on sex-selective abortion. If the women of their own country, they would rank 151 out of 188 countries in human development while India’s men would come in at 120. The average adult man in India gets twice as many years of schooling as the average adult woman.5

The difference in the standard of living between the ‘mainstream’ and SCs and STs in India, despite the system of universal adult franchise, is glaring. Fewer than 5 percent of these marginalized group households have a primary earner who makes more than Rs. 10,000 per month (US$ 150). For the “others”, it’s twice as many households.6

**ENVIRONMENTAL CONTEXT**

 Globally India is the fourth largest emitter of greenhouse gases in absolute terms even though its per capita emissions rank is low. Indeed, the ‘ecological footprint’ of many Indians may need to increase to allow for sufficient food, shelter, electricity, sanitation, medicine and material goods. At the same time, the United Nations projects that India’s population will reach 1.7 billion by 2050. If this is the case, India is likely to face a widening ecological deficit even if current per capita levels of resource consumption remain the same. 9

Hence, given the high growth rate, large population and unsustainable practices, India needs to promote a new green technology-enabled growth model. Fossil fuel-based energy production is the largest contributor to greenhouse gas emissions. While sticking to the principle of Common but Differentiated Responsibility (CBDR) based on historical debt owed by developed countries, India needs to promote a new green technology-enabled growth model. It needs to recognize that those most affected by environmental degradation and climate change are the poorest whose lives and livelihood depend on the environment.

4 Anant Vijay Kala and Eric Ballman (May 25, 2016), ‘Modi’s First Two
7 Government of India, Socio Economic Caste Census (2011); www.secc.gov.in/report/list/ (last accessed 15.02.2017)
In fact, the social cost of development is often borne by the poorest that ironically benefit the least from the current paradigm of development. It is estimated that more than one-third of the population displaced due to development projects like big dams or mining activities are tribes, the traditional guardians of the environment. Further, such development projects are often in conflict with Goal 15 which seeks to promote sustainable use of terrestrial ecosystems and halt and reverse land degradation and biodiversity loss. The effect of climate change has already impacted farmers as untimely heavy rain and drought affect the growth cycle of different crops.

No external agreement or agent can deny India's right to material prosperity and industrial development but the key is to find the right balance between the economy, environment, and energy. India, in fact, has a long history and tradition of harmonious co-existence between humans and nature that is more relevant given the current Government's policy of promoting manufacturing in India through the "Make in India" project where by the drive to promote the ease of doing business should not be at the cost of environment.

**TOGETHER WE CAN: TRANSFORMING SDG Rhetoric into Reality**

SDGs are universal in nature and a universal approach involving all stakeholders is the need of the hour if the SDGs are to move from rhetoric to reality. India is vital to the success of SDGs because of the disproportionate weight that India has on the outcomes with its 1.3 billion population. Furthermore, India plays a key leadership role in the South Asian region as well as the global South and other countries look up to it for best practices. The key challenges and opportunities listed below require a networked approach to co-create optimal solutions.

**UPHOLDING RIGHTS-BASED POLICY FORMULATION**

We observe that the 17 SDGs are very much in consonance with the non-binding but progressive Directive Principles of State Policy and rights-based policy making. Rights-based legislation like the Forest Rights Act (2006), National Food Security Act (2013), Right to Education Act (2009), and the Right to Information Act (2005), did not merely provide economic and social entitlements to the poor but were a strong assertion of their political rights. They were an attempt by India's poorest citizens to claim delivery of basic services and ensure accountability.

Many of these policies have immense scope and cross-cut various SDGs. For example, Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Act (MGNREGA, 2005), which guarantees a minimum number of work days to every household with the stipulation that at least one-third of people employed should be women is a case in point. Further, many of the works undertaken under MGNREGA like rainwater harvesting and soil conservation are aimed at protecting the environment. Thus if we map this policy to the SDGs we understand that it promotes ending poverty through a safety net (Goal 1), ending hunger and achieving food security (Goal 2), achieving gender equality (Goal 5), productive employment (Goal 8) and sustainable use of terrestrial ecosystems (Goal 15).

A recent challenge to this rights-based perspective has been a set of new social security schemes like Pradhan Mantri Jan Dhan Yojana, the Pradhan Mantri Jeevan Jyoti Bima Yojana, the Pradhan Mantri Suraksha Bima Yojana and the Atal Pension Yojana, which are mostly contributory in nature. The major concern here is that none of these are rights-based, which means they can be wound up at any time, or the benefits denied on technical grounds (the absence of an Aadhar card, for instance).

**MOBILIZING RESOURCES**

Finance remains the elephant in the room which needs to be urgently addressed. With the Addis Ababa conference unable to agree on concrete steps to crack down on tax avoidance and illicit money transfers and with official development assistance (ODA) from developed countries becoming less dependable, developing countries such as India are forced to rely solely on their own resources to achieve the SDGs.

At a policy formulation level, India is generally progressive, but the main challenge in translating policy to the outcome is budget outlays. The failure to allocate sufficient funds for social infrastructure including health and education is a lapse in the Indian growth story and also the root cause of increasing inequality. Education spending in India has been lower than the world average. Globally, 4.9 percent of GDP was spent on education in 2010 while India spent only 3.3 percent of GDP according to World Bank data. Similarly, in health, India spends only around 1.3 percent of GDP when the benchmark is 3 percent. The Government may be constrained in being the sole provider of resources required to implement the SDGs. Hence, it will be important to work towards achieving the SDGs through a multi-stakeholder approach by mobilizing the private sector, foreign remittances, and citizens.

For example, Universal Health Coverage is important to prevent people slipping into poverty due to ill health and to ensure everyone in need has access to good quality health services. This would require India to raise public to health expenditure to 2.5 per cent of the GDP from the current 1.4 per cent. To complement tax revenue-based health financing, incremental expansion of prepayment and risk pooling mechanisms such as Social Health Insurance are worth considering. Given the magnitude of the private sector in India, mobilizing the private sector is vital. Further, unlike developed countries where there is that national health insurance, the private healthcare providers as demonstrated by countries like Thailand is vital.

**INSTITUTING MECHANISMS FOR PLANNING, EVALUATION, AND MONITORING**

The task of coordinating the SDGs has been entrusted to the NITI Aayog, the Government of India's premier think tank which recently replaced more than six decades old Planning Commission and National Development Council (NDC). However, the capacity of the new body to fund, implement and monitor social sector schemes is as yet unclear. Furthermore, with the distinction between Plan and Non-Plan spending also being eraser, the fate of important planning strategies for the marginalized communities like the Schedule Caste Sub Plan and Tribal Sub Plan is in limbo. It is of vital importance that the NITI Aayog steps up to the task of coordinating SDGs with states in the spirit of cooperative federalism while also ensuring inclusion of all vulnerable communities.

Digital India and e-governance could well be a game changer for policy evaluation and monitoring since it can help generate timely, reliable and relevant data which is a critical pillar of evidence-based policy making. Only data-driven, evidence-based policy making can create the world we want. However, major hurdles remain in terms of affordability, connectivity, accessibility. Creating content in local languages, leveraging existing technology, improving literacy and promoting technological innovations is vital to bridge the digital divide. Further mechanisms like green accounting can help ensure that environment is not sacrificed at the altar of ease of doing business or drive to ‘Make in India’.

**ENABLING TRANSFORMATION THROUGH TECHNOLOGY AND INNOVATION**

Technology has the capability to be the game changer promoting sustainable consumption and production patterns (Goal 12). The developed nations need to be open to technology transfers without rigid adherence to patent laws. Developing nations like India need to adapt these technologies to suit the local context while ensuring an equitable Intellectual Property regime. Technology is likely to remain the cornerstone for all our climate change adaptation and mitigation measures.

The current model of unplanned urbanization has led to emerging challenges such as climate change, air pollution, water pollution, and unchecked urban expansion with negative social, economic and environmental impacts. Many, if not all, of these challenges, are experienced by India where urbanizations have been mostly unplanned. With India expected to become 50 per cent urban by 2050 from about 30 per cent currently, the ‘Smart Cities’ initiative holds immense potential to ensure
sustainable and inclusive urbanization through the use of smart technology like net metering of energy consumption, GPS-based transport services, smart lighting devices, and renewable energy promotion.

LINKING LOCAL TO GLOBAL

Linking local to global involves two mutual and complementary processes—one is integrating the global goals into the local development process and the other is promoting local best practices for global adoption. The key to integrating global goals locally is through creating awareness about the 2030 Agenda and ensuring a sustained dialogue on the same.

A case in point would be the ‘Swachh Bharat Abhiyan’ which seeks to eliminate open defecation in India. One of the main problems of the current scheme as well as its predecessor ‘Nirmal Bharat Abhiyan’ which had the same objective, was the focus was on creating physical infrastructure in the form of toilets rather than bringing about a cultural shift in understanding the dangers of open defecation. Civil society can play a key role in spreading awareness as well as keeping the governments at all levels accountable to SDGs.

Numerous traditional Indian practices could contribute to the global sustainable development paradigm. For instance, below-sea-level farming practiced in Kuttanad in Kerala could be used as a template for resilient agriculture to tackle challenges posed by rising sea levels in low-lying areas due to climate change. An effort should be made to document such traditional practices and make it digitally accessible.

CREATING WIN-WIN GLOBAL PARTNERSHIPS

Revitalizing global partnerships as envisaged in Goal 17 is pivotal for sustainable development. Technology transfers and financial support from developed countries to developing countries are critical to tackling climate change. The developing nations also need to own more responsibility, as demonstrated by India, by signing the climatic change agreement evolved at the World Climate Change Conference (COP21) held in Paris which proposes a reduction in greenhouse gas emissions to limit the global rise in temperature to 1.5 degree Celsius.

India has also taken the lead with the recently launched International Solar Alliance (ISA) that seeks to share collective ambitions of reducing the cost of finance and technology that is needed to deploy solar power widely. Among the tasks that the Alliance would pursue are cooperation in training, building institutions, regulatory issues, common standards, and investment including joint ventures.

Another emulative model is the Indian Technical and Economic Cooperation (ITEC) which is a part of India’s development cooperation. Through the ITEC programme, India could utilize its vast experience in promoting small-scale programs in areas like education, health, and community development and set a good model of south-south Cooperation.

The goal of sustainable development cannot be achieved globally without India and the country cannot successfully achieve the SDGs without global support. The SDGs are attainable only if the rhetoric is matched by concrete action, political will and a commitment to change.

Such a measure is a necessity and not an option, as informed by the oft-quoted assertion of the United Nations Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon that: “There can be no Plan B because there is no Planet B.”
OXFAM INDIA

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