

India's path to sustainable development: progress and prospects

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Abstract: The Government of India aligned the United Nations SDGs with its national development agenda from 2015 onward. NITI Aayog tracks the progress through the SDG India Index, and the Ministry of Statistics and Programme Implementation (MoSPI) does so through the National Indicator Framework (NIF). As per the Sustainable Development Report 2025, the SDG score of India stands at 65.0, ranking 143 out of 193 countries. Visible progress is being made in areas related to health, energy access, and digital connectivity. However, major challenges persist in areas concerning gender equality, the environment, and the strengthening of institutions. The wide differences among states, as depicted by the SDG India Index 2023–24, underscore the necessity for area-specific strategies. The Labour Force Surveys indicate a rise in female participation; however, the quality of jobs continues to be a cause for concern. The paper examines the progress of India, main challenges, and directions in the future towards the attainment of the 2030 Agenda.

Key Words: NITI Aayog, Gender Equality, Sustainable Development Report, Employment, and Climate Change etc.

1. INTRODUCTION:

The SDGs represent a global call for action to end poverty, protect the planet, and ensure prosperity for all by 2030. Adopted by all United Nations member states in 2015, the 17 goals and 169 associated targets seek to address requirements for health, education, gender equality, clean energy, economic growth, climate action, and sustainable governance. India, being among the largest developing nations of the world, is critical for the success of this agenda at the global level. India's commitment to sustainable development draws on its earlier experience with the MDGs. While it had achieved remarkable progress under the MDGs on reducing poverty, improving primary education, and reduction in maternal health, it faced challenges on fronts such as environmental protection, inequality, and social inclusion. From this learning, the Government of India has integrated SDGs into the national development framework, aligning them with its major national policies like Make in India, Digital India, Skill India, Swachh Bharat Mission, Jal Jeevan Mission, and Ayushman Bharat. NITI Aayog has been assigned the role of nodal agency for SDG coordination, monitoring, and reporting in India. It publishes the SDG India Index, which tracks the progress of all states and Union Territories across multiple indicators.

The Ministry of Statistics and Programme Implementation of Government of India, therefore, as proposed a National Indicator Framework to provide an integrated statistical basis within which the SDG targets could be monitored. According to the SDR 2025, India ranks 143rd among 193 countries with a score of 65.0. While there is a noticeable progress in areas such as electricity access, digital connectivity, maternal and child health, and sanitation, grave gaps exist in gender equality, quality employment, environment sustainability, and institutional capacity. Similarly, the whole-of-society approach has been adopted in SDG implementation in India through effective partnerships between government, private sector, civil society, and local communities. The Voluntary National Review, 2025 submitted to the United Nations, highlights strategies like localization of SDGs, data-driven policy making, and financial and technological partnerships for progress. It is important to understand areas where the country has performed well and the ones where performance has remained weak, as it provides valuable insight into policy effectiveness, governance capacity, and strategic priorities. This paper aiming to assessing India's SDG progress and future path to inclusive, sustainable growth by 2030.

2. OBJECTIVES: Assessing India's SDG progress and future path to inclusive, sustainable growth by 2030.

3. RESEARCH METHOD: This research paper is based on secondary data from authentic and official sources i.e. SDR 2025 by SDSN, NITI Aayog's SDG India Index 2024–25, National Indicator Framework (NIF)

4. FINDINGS:

4.1 Future Directions for India:

India is at a very critical juncture in its journey toward the SDGs. With less than a decade to go before the 2030 deadline, it becomes important to focus on practical strategies and policy directions to accelerate progress. Future directions for India should balance economic growth with social inclusion and environmental sustainability. The reduction of regional disparities is one of the most important steps. From Kerala and Himachal Pradesh, there are examples that progress is possible through strong governance, investment in human development, and efficient welfare delivery. The central government should encourage knowledge-sharing between states and provide additional financial and technical support to lagging regions like Bihar, Jharkhand, and Uttar Pradesh. This way, balanced progress across the country would be ensured.

Strengthening poverty alleviation and social protection must remain a priority. Schemes like PM-KISAN, MGNREGA, and the Public Distribution System should be expanded with better targeting so that benefits reach the poorest households. Social safety nets, particularly for vulnerable groups such as migrant workers, women-headed households, and the urban poor, need to be strengthened to prevent them from falling back into poverty during crises such as pandemics or natural disasters. In another direction, there is a need to focus on job creation and skill development. While India has made progress with renewable energy, especially solar and wind, coal remains a major source. The future demands an accelerated transition toward clean energy, energy-efficient technologies, and sustainable urban planning. Afforestation drives, water conservation programs, and strict pollution-control mechanisms would need to be prioritized. Programs to curb gender-based violence, improve health access, and ensure equal pay for equal work are critically important for achieving not only SDG 5 but also improving outcomes in education, health, and economic growth. The expansion of digital platforms for service delivery will enhance efficiency and reduce corruption in service delivery, besides increasing outreach, as in the case of Aadhaar-linked subsidies and online learning.

4.2 India's Overall Progress

India's progress towards the SDGs reflects both achievements and challenges. According to the SDR 2025, India secured an overall SDG Index score of 65.0, placing it 143rd among 193 countries. This ranking shows that while the country has made noticeable improvements in certain sectors, considerable gaps still exist in areas such as gender equality, environment, and governance. Initiatives like the Jal Jeevan Mission (JJM) and Swachh Bharat Mission (SBM) brought improvement in water supply and sanitation, especially in rural areas. In similar ways, progress in health could be seen through a decrease in maternal and infant mortality rates, more institutional deliveries, and expanded immunization coverage.

Another encouraging trend is improvement in labour force participation, particularly among women. The Periodic Labour Force Survey for 2023–24 and early 2025 shows a rise in women's participation in the workforce. However, most of these jobs are still in the informal sector or in low-paying roles, hence their contribution towards achieving true gender equality and economic empowerment remains limited. At the global level, India ranked 131st out of 148 countries in the Global Gender Gap Report 2025, indicating that despite marginal gains, gender disparity remains a cause for serious concern.

The large variation in performance across states is reflected in the recent SDG India Index 2023–24 published by NITI Aayog. While southern states like Kerala and Tamil Nadu continue to perform well in education, health, and gender equality indicators, several states in central and northern India are still lagging. In this regard, India's path toward achievement of the SDGs is not even and highly dependent on regional governance capacity and local conditions. On the other hand, in terms of environmental sustainability, India faces serious challenges. Even though India has pledged to achieve net zero emissions by 2070, balancing economic growth with environmental commitments remains difficult.

5. DISCUSSION:

5.1 Progress on Selected Goals

A closer examination of selected goals illustrates a more accurate overview of the progress the country is making.



SDG 1: No Poverty

The country has visibly achieved certain gains in poverty reduction. Estimates of the Multidimensional Poverty Index suggest that millions have moved out of poverty in the last decade, supported by expanded social protection, rural employment schemes, and food distribution systems. Flagship initiatives like MGNREGA, Pradhan Mantri Garib Kalyan Yojana, and PM Awas Yojana have contributed immensely to livelihood security, basic housing, and safety nets.

SDG 2: Zero Hunger

Food security continues to be a mixed story. On one hand, India runs the world's largest Public Distribution System, or PDS, which provides subsidized food grains to over 800 million people. Schemes like POSHAN Abhiyaan and the Integrated Child Development Services (ICDS) aim at reducing malnutrition among women and children.

SDG 3: Good Health and Well-Being

India has achieved improvements in maternal and child health indicators. The number of institutional deliveries has significantly increased, bringing down the Maternal Mortality Ratio. Infant and under-five mortality rates have declined, reflecting improvements in healthcare access and exposure to initiatives such as Ayushman Bharat, which provides health insurance to poor households.

SDG 4: Quality Education

Education remains a central component in India's journey toward sustainable development. A solid legislative foundation for universal education came with the Right to Education Act, 2009. More recently, the National Education Policy of 2020 brought in significant changes with a focus on holistic development, digital learning, vocational skills, and mother-tongue-based instruction at the foundational level. To realize SDG 4, India must strengthen teacher training, invest in digital education infrastructure, and focus on ECCE. India's young demographic dividend will be realized only if education outcomes are considerably improved.

SDG 5: Gender Equality

According to the Periodic Labour Force Survey, female participation in the labour force increased during 2023–24 compared to previous years. Female participation in higher education is slowly increasing. Globally, India's ranking in the Global Gender Gap Report 2025 remains lower compared to most countries—it ranks 131 out of a total of 148 countries.

SDG 6: Clean Water and Sanitation

Safe drinking water and sanitation stand out as issues that the government has accorded high priority through programmes such as Jal Jeevan Mission and Swachh Bharat Mission. Piped water connections to rural households have grown fast, and open defecation has seen a drastic fall.

SDG 7: Affordable and Clean Energy

India has reached nearly universal electricity access. The country also expanded its renewable energy capacity, with ambitious targets for both solar and wind power. The Ujjwala Yojana has provided millions of poor households with clean cooking fuel, reducing dependence on traditional biomass.

SDG8–9: Decent Work, Industry, Innovation and Infrastructure

Increased growth in the economy has opened up job avenues, particularly in the service and digital sectors. The continuous growth of India's startup ecosystem and various infrastructure development projects have sparked innovation and improved connectivity.

SDG 10: Reduced Inequalities

India has made mixed progress in reducing inequality. On the one hand, social protection schemes like MGNREGA, PM-KISAN, Ayushman Bharat, and targeted subsidies have supported vulnerable populations. The Jan Dhan Yojana has enhanced financial inclusion, bringing millions of low-income households into the banking system. Similarly, Aadhaar-enabled Direct Benefit Transfers have reduced leakages and ensured that welfare schemes reach the intended beneficiaries.

SDG 11: Sustainable Cities and Communities

By 2031, India's urban population is projected to cross 600 million. In this context, sustainable urbanization is a critical priority. In fact, various initiatives like Smart Cities Mission, AMRUT, and PMAY have been emphasizing affordable housing, improved sanitation, urban mobility, and green infrastructure. Swachh Bharat Mission has ensured cleaner cities and better solid waste management in many municipalities.

SDG 12: Responsible Consumption and Production

Economic growth has increased India's resource demand, with its consequences for sustainable consumption and production. The Plastic Waste Management Rules, E-Waste Management Rules, and EPR framework lay responsibility on industries for waste management. Campaigns like the "Lifestyle for Environment (LiFE)", which India launched at COP26, promote sustainable practices at the household and community levels.

SDG 13: Climate Action

India is committed internationally, most notably to net-zero emissions by 2070. It has introduced renewable energy projects, afforestation programmes, and initiatives to promote electric mobility. Coal remains the mainstay of the economy, and industrialization is moving swiftly forward, as are the levels of urban pollution. Climate action is an uphill task.

SDG 14: Life below Water

While India is not an island country, its coastline stretches over 7,500 km and encompasses a population very dependent on marine and coastal resources. The government has introduced projects like the Sagarmala Programme, Deep Ocean Mission, and Integrated Coastal Zone Management Project in order to boost the maritime economy while safeguarding ecosystems. The Blue Economy policy framework overlaps with balancing economic interests with conservation goals through sectors like shipping, fisheries, and offshore energy.

SDG 15: Life on Land

India is one of the world's 17 "mega diverse" countries, hosting a wide range of ecosystems-from forests and wetlands to deserts and mountains. In protecting terrestrial ecosystems, the country has increased its number of protected areas, adding 104 national parks, 566 wildlife sanctuaries, and 18 biosphere reserves. Protection programs for flagship species such as Project Tiger and Project Elephant have helped recover key species. The Compensatory Afforestation Fund, Green India Mission, and National Afforestation Programme will restore degraded land and enhance carbon sinks.

SDG 16–17: Peace, Justice, And Partnerships

India stressed the principles of transparency in governance, federal cooperation, and international partnerships for achieving sustainable development. The VNR 2025 reiterates the need for partnership with the states, local governments, civil society, and the private sector. However, challenging tasks such as improvement in institutional efficiency, reduction in corruption, and delivery of services effectively at the grassroots level remain to be pursued.

6. CONCLUSION : India's progress towards the SDGs is a mixed bag of success and unfinished tasks. The country has made commendable progress in the last ten years in providing access to electricity, clean water, sanitation, maternal and child health, and digital infrastructure. Government initiatives like Swachh Bharat Mission, Jal Jeevan Mission, Ayushman Bharat, and MGNREGA have substantially improved the lives of millions of Indians. The SDG India Index 2023–24 also reflects successful adoption of effective policies and their measurable outcomes in some states. However, formidable challenges remain. Regional disparities, persistent poverty, gender inequality, unemployment, and environmental risks continue to hamper India's progress on the SDGs. Climate change, air pollution, and over-dependence on fossil fuels are some of the major obstacles to sustainable growth. Data gaps and weak governance in some regions further limit the efficiency of policy intervention. These structural challenges will have to be addressed on the path to inclusive development, especially through focused social policies and investment in human capital. Going forward, India needs to follow a multi-pronged, inclusive strategy. It needs to strengthen social protection, empower women, attain universal quality education and health, and speed up the transition to renewable energy.

For all this, effective local governance, better data systems, public-private partnerships, and community engagement will be decisive to ensure that development actually reaches all sections of society. India's pursuit of SDGs has to effectively balance economic growth with environmental sustainability and social equity. In essence, India has made measurable progress toward the SDGs, but the road ahead promises to be long and arduous. Focusing on inclusive growth, gender equality, climate action, and good governance, India can achieve not only its 2030 SDG targets but also

become a global beacon for sustainable development in a large and diverse developing country. The accomplishment of SDGs in India will require relentless effort, concerted action across sectors, and a clear vision for an equitable and sustainable development.

7. LIMITATIONS: Despite some encouraging progress, India's journey towards achieving the SDGs by 2030 is characterized by a slew of challenges. These are both structural and policy-related challenges that need urgent attention. A major challenge is regional disparity in development. States like Kerala, Tamil Nadu, and Himachal Pradesh are well on their way to achieving many SDG targets, while states like Bihar, Uttar Pradesh, Madhya Pradesh, Rajasthan and Jharkhand lag far behind in education, health, and poverty reduction. This uneven development is a serious impediment to national-level progress because India cannot achieve the SDGs unless every region goes ahead together. The other critical challenges are poverty and inequality. According to reports by Oxfam (2024), the richest 10% hold over 70% of the wealth of the country, with a large section of the population still struggling to access basic needs like nutritious food, quality healthcare, and safe housing. This exacerbates inequality that ultimately erodes social cohesion, weakening the effectiveness of welfare programs. Unemployment and underemployment are also serious concerns.

Even though India's workforce is large, a majority of jobs are informal, offering no job security or social protection. Without addressing this challenge, SDG 8 will continue to be hard to achieve. A particularly alarming challenge is environmental sustainability. Air pollution continues to be one of the leading causes of premature deaths, especially in cities like Delhi, Lucknow, and Kanpur. Achieving SDG 13 (Climate Action) requires balancing industrial growth with strict environmental regulations, which is politically and economically complex. Another challenge relates to gender inequality. Even though women's participation in education and the workforce has improved, issues like wage gaps, underrepresentation in leadership positions, and high levels of gender-based violence continue to hinder progress. Without strong data systems, policy interventions may not reach the intended groups effectively. Finally, the COVID-19 pandemic reversed progress in many of the goals, particularly in health, education, and poverty reduction.

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