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Assessing India's Progress towards Sustainable Development Goals: A Critical Analysis

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Abstract

India's progress toward achieving the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) has been marked by significant advancements and persistent challenges. This study critically analyses India's performance across key SDG indicators, focusing on poverty alleviation, healthcare, education, gender equality, renewable energy, and environmental sustainability. Government initiatives such as Ayushman Bharat, Beti Bachao Beti Padhao, MGNREGA, and the National Solar Mission have contributed to socio-economic growth, leading to a significant reduction in multidimensional poverty and improvements in literacy rates and healthcare access. However, challenges remain in income inequality, employment disparities, and climate change mitigation, with 77% of the national wealth concentrated among the top 10% of the population and women's labour force participation at only 27%. India's renewable energy capacity has reached 42%, yet further efforts are needed to achieve a low-carbon economy. This paper employs a data-driven approach to evaluate India's SDG trajectory, highlighting gaps in policy implementation and financial investments. It underscores the need for strengthened governance, enhanced public-private partnerships, and innovative policy frameworks to accelerate SDG achievement by 2030. The findings emphasize that while India is on the path to sustainable growth, urgent multi-sectoral interventions are required to ensure an inclusive and resilient future.

Keywords: Sustainable Development Goals, India's SDG Progress, Economic Growth, Poverty Reduction, Renewable Energy, Gender Equality, Climate Change, Public Policy, Education, Healthcare Reforms.

1. Introduction

The Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), adopted by all United Nations (UN) member states in 2015, provide a universal blueprint for addressing global challenges such as poverty, inequality, environmental degradation, and climate change. The 17 SDGs, part of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development, emphasize an integrated approach to economic growth, social inclusion, and environmental sustainability (United Nations, 2015) [13]. India, as a signatory, has committed to aligning its national policies with these global objectives, making significant efforts to integrate SDG targets into its development framework.

India's progress towards the SDGs has been mixed, with remarkable advancements in certain areas while challenges persist in others. As of 2023, India ranked 112th out of 166 countries on the SDG Index, with a score of 60.3 out of 100, reflecting both achievements and gaps in sustainable development (Sachs *et al.*, 2023). According to NITI Aayog, India's SDG Index score improved from 57 in 2018 to 66 in 2021, driven by improvements in health, renewable energy, and sanitation (NITI Aayog, 2021) [9]. However, disparities

between states remain, with Kerala, Himachal Pradesh, and Tamil Nadu consistently performing well, whereas states like Bihar, Jharkhand, and Uttar Pradesh lag behind (NITI Aayog, 2023) [9].

India has launched several national initiatives to accelerate SDG progress. Programs such as Ayushman Bharat, which has provided over 500 million beneficiaries with health insurance, and Pradhan Mantri Awas Yojana, which has constructed more than 30 million houses, directly contribute to SDG 3 (Good Health and Well-being) and SDG 11 (Sustainable Cities and Communities), respectively (Government of India, 2023). The Jal Jeevan Mission, aimed at providing piped drinking water to all rural households, has increased coverage from 17% in 2019 to 64% in 2023, significantly impacting SDG 6 (Clean Water and Sanitation) (Ministry of Jal Shakti, 2023).

Despite these advancements, challenges persist. India's poverty rate, though reduced, still affects over 16% of the population, and malnutrition rates among children under five remain at 35.5%, impacting SDG 1 (No Poverty) and SDG 2 (Zero Hunger) (World Bank, 2023) [17]. Environmental

sustainability is also a concern, as India is the third-largest emitter of greenhouse gases globally, with carbon emissions reaching 2.88 billion metric tons in 2022 (IEA, 2023).

Given its scale and diversity, India's SDG journey requires continuous policy refinement, increased investments, and strong governance mechanisms. This paper critically assesses India's progress toward achieving the SDGs, analysing sector-wise developments, challenges, and future strategies to meet the 2030 Agenda.

2. Methodology

This study employs a mixed-method approach, combining quantitative data analysis and qualitative evaluation to assess India's progress toward the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). The research is based on secondary data sources, including government reports, international SDG indices, and independent assessments by global organizations. The study also incorporates a comparative analysis of India's SDG performance over the years to identify trends, gaps, and areas requiring policy interventions.

i). Data Sources and Collection: The primary sources of data include reports from NITI Aayog, the Ministry of Statistics and Programme Implementation (MoSPI), the United Nations Sustainable Development Report, and the World Bank. NITI Aayog's SDG India Index provides state-wise rankings and performance scores across various SDGs, offering insights into regional disparities (NITI Aayog, 2023)^[9]. The Global SDG Index, published annually, ranks India's overall progress relative to other countries, allowing for international benchmarking (Sachs *et al.*, 2023). Additionally, statistical data from MoSPI, such as poverty levels, literacy rates, and healthcare indicators, contribute to an in-depth analysis. For environmental and climate-related SDGs, data from the International Energy Agency (IEA) and the Climate Action Tracker are examined to assess India's carbon emissions, renewable energy adoption, and climate policy effectiveness (IEA, 2023). Employment and economic growth indicators are sourced from the Reserve Bank of India (RBI) and the Periodic Labour Force Survey (PLFS) to evaluate the progress of SDG 8 (Decent Work and Economic Growth).

ii). Analytical Framework: A descriptive statistical approach is used to analyze India's progress based on numerical indicators such as poverty rate, literacy levels, health coverage, employment trends, and environmental sustainability metrics. These indicators help quantify the extent of progress and highlight key gaps in achieving the SDGs.

A trend analysis method is applied to assess India's SDG performance over the past decade, using time-series data to track improvements or setbacks. For example, India's renewable energy capacity increased from 39 GW in 2015 to 125 GW in 2023, reflecting significant strides toward SDG 7 (Affordable and Clean Energy) (Ministry of New and Renewable Energy, 2023)^[6]. Similarly, the decline in the infant mortality rate from 37 per 1,000 live births in 2015 to 28 in 2022 showcases progress in SDG 3 (Good Health and Well-being) (National Family Health Survey, 2023).

Furthermore, comparative analysis is conducted between high-performing and low-performing states to understand policy effectiveness and implementation challenges. This helps identify best practices from states like Kerala and Tamil Nadu, which consistently score higher in health

and education-related SDGs, and the struggles of states like Bihar and Uttar Pradesh, which lag behind (NITI Aayog, 2023)^[9].

By employing this comprehensive methodological approach, the study ensures a balanced and evidence-based assessment of India's SDG progress while identifying key challenges and policy recommendations for future improvements.

3. Overview of India's SDG Progress

India has made significant strides toward achieving the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), yet progress remains uneven across different sectors and regions. As the world's most populous country, with 1.42 billion people (United Nations, 2023)^[15], India faces unique challenges in balancing economic growth, social development, and environmental sustainability. The country's efforts are guided by the SDG India Index, developed by NITI Aayog, which tracks state-wise performance and provides policy insights.

i). India's Global SDG Ranking: India ranked 112th out of 166 countries in the 2023 SDG Index, with an overall score of 60.3 out of 100, reflecting both progress and areas of concern (Sachs *et al.*, 2023). While India has made substantial gains in poverty reduction, renewable energy expansion, and sanitation, challenges persist in areas such as gender equality, climate action, and quality education. Compared to other large economies, India lags behind China (ranked 57th) and Brazil (ranked 75th), indicating the need for accelerated efforts in multiple SDG targets (United Nations, 2023)^[15].

ii). National-Level Achievements: Several government initiatives have directly contributed to India's SDG progress. The Swachh Bharat Mission, launched in 2014, increased rural sanitation coverage from 39% in 2014 to over 98% in 2023, significantly impacting SDG 6 (Clean Water and Sanitation) (Ministry of Jal Shakti, 2023). Similarly, the Pradhan Mantri Ujjwala Yojana has provided more than 96 million LPG connections to low-income households, reducing dependence on traditional biomass fuels and improving indoor air quality, which aligns with SDG 7 (Affordable and Clean Energy) (Ministry of Petroleum and Natural Gas, 2023).

Economic indicators also show progress. India's GDP grew by 7.2% in 2022-23, making it one of the fastest-growing major economies, positively influencing SDG 8 (Decent Work and Economic Growth) (Reserve Bank of India, 2023). The employment rate has also improved, with formal employment rising from 17% in 2017 to 23% in 2023 (Periodic Labour Force Survey, 2023).

iii). Regional Disparities and Challenges: Despite national-level progress, significant disparities exist among states. Kerala, Tamil Nadu, and Himachal Pradesh consistently rank highest in the SDG India Index, with scores above 75, indicating strong performance in health, education, and gender equality (NITI Aayog, 2023)^[9]. In contrast, Bihar, Jharkhand, and Uttar Pradesh remain among the lowest performers, with SDG scores below 50, primarily due to challenges in poverty reduction, literacy rates, and infrastructure development.

Environmental sustainability remains a pressing concern. India is the third-largest emitter of greenhouse gases, contributing 2.88 billion metric tons of CO₂ emissions in 2022 (IEA, 2023). While the country has expanded its renewable energy capacity to 125 GW, further efforts are needed to meet its 500 GW target by 2030 under the Paris

Agreement commitments (Ministry of New and Renewable Energy, 2023)^[6].

iv). The Road Ahead: India's progress toward the SDGs highlights both achievements and gaps. While targeted policies have improved several indicators, economic inequality, climate resilience, and social inclusion remain areas requiring urgent attention. Strengthening state-level implementation, increasing private-sector involvement, and enhancing data-driven governance will be crucial for accelerating progress toward the 2030 Agenda.

4. Key Challenges in Achieving SDGs

India's progress toward achieving the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) has been commendable in many areas, yet several challenges hinder the country's ability to meet the 2030 targets. The major roadblocks include economic disparities, climate vulnerabilities, gender inequality, and gaps in healthcare and education. Addressing these challenges requires multi-sectoral policy interventions, financial investments, and enhanced governance mechanisms.

i). Economic Inequality and Poverty: Despite significant poverty reduction, 10.9% of India's population still lives below the international poverty line of \$2.15 per day (World Bank, 2023)^[17]. Rural poverty remains higher than urban poverty, with over 20% of rural households lacking stable income sources (NITI Aayog, 2023)^[9]. Moreover, income inequality has widened, with the top 10% of the population owning over 77% of the country's wealth (Oxfam, 2023)^[10]. Such disparities hinder inclusive growth and challenge the achievement of SDG 1 (No Poverty) and SDG 10 (Reduced Inequalities).

ii). Environmental Sustainability and Climate Change: India faces significant environmental challenges, making SDG 13 (Climate Action) a major area of concern. The country is the third-largest emitter of greenhouse gases, contributing 2.88 billion metric tons of CO₂ emissions in 2022 (IEA, 2023). Rising temperatures have led to more frequent heatwaves, with over 3,000 heat-related deaths reported in the last decade (Ministry of Earth Sciences, 2023). Additionally, 40% of India's land is facing desertification due to deforestation and unsustainable farming practices (UNCCD, 2023). Despite increasing renewable energy capacity, dependence on coal remains high, accounting for 55% of total electricity generation (Ministry of Power, 2023).

iii). Gender Disparities and Social Inclusion: Gender inequality remains a persistent challenge, particularly in workforce participation and political representation. Women's labour force participation stands at 24%, significantly lower than the global average of 47% (ILO, 2023)^[2]. Furthermore, crimes against women increased by 15% between 2015 and 2022, highlighting safety concerns (National Crime Records Bureau, 2023). Achieving SDG 5 (Gender Equality) requires stronger policies to improve women's education, employment, and security.

iv). Gaps in Healthcare and Education: Despite improvements, India's healthcare system remains underfunded, with public health expenditure at 2.1% of GDP, far below the WHO's recommended 5% (Ministry of Health and Family Welfare, 2023). The doctor-to-patient ratio is 1:1,511, lower than the WHO standard of 1:1,000 (WHO, 2023). Similarly, in education, over 30% of children in rural areas lack access to quality primary

education, impacting SDG 4 (Quality Education) (ASER Report, 2023).

v). Institutional and Financial Constraints: The implementation of SDGs requires significant financial resources. India needs an estimated \$2.64 trillion in additional funding by 2030 to meet all SDG targets (UNDP, 2023)^[11]. However, domestic resource mobilization remains a challenge, with tax revenue at 11% of GDP, lower than many emerging economies (IMF, 2023). Moreover, gaps in governance, corruption, and inefficient policy implementation slow down progress across multiple SDGs.

vi). The Way Forward: Addressing these challenges requires multi-stakeholder collaboration, increased public and private investments, and stronger policy frameworks. Strengthening climate resilience, enhancing social inclusion, and improving institutional governance will be critical in ensuring India's sustainable development journey remains on track.

5. Government Policies and Initiatives for SDG Implementation

India has implemented several policies and initiatives to accelerate progress toward the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). The government has integrated SDG targets into national and state-level policies, focusing on poverty alleviation, climate action, gender equality, and economic growth. These efforts, led by NITI Aayog, various ministries, and state governments, are crucial for ensuring that India meets its 2030 Agenda commitments.

i). NITI Aayog and the SDG India Index: The SDG India Index, developed by NITI Aayog, is a key initiative that tracks India's SDG progress at the state level. The 2023 SDG India Index ranked Kerala, Himachal Pradesh, and Tamil Nadu among the top-performing states, with scores above 75, while Bihar, Jharkhand, and Uttar Pradesh lagged behind with scores below 50 (NITI Aayog, 2023)^[9]. This index helps policymakers identify focus areas and improve governance mechanisms for better SDG implementation.

ii). Poverty Alleviation and Economic Growth: The government has launched several programs to reduce poverty (SDG 1) and promote economic growth (SDG 8). The Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Act (MGNREGA) provided 2.65 billion person-days of employment in 2022-23, benefiting rural households and improving income security (Ministry of Rural Development, 2023). Additionally, the Pradhan Mantri Jan Dhan Yojana has helped open over 490 million bank accounts, increasing financial inclusion and economic participation (Reserve Bank of India, 2023).

iii). Clean Energy and Climate Action: To advance SDG 7 (Affordable and Clean Energy) and SDG 13 (Climate Action), India has expanded its renewable energy capacity. The National Solar Mission has contributed to 68 GW of solar power capacity as of 2023, with a target of 280 GW by 2030 (Ministry of New and Renewable Energy, 2023)^[6]. The Faster Adoption and Manufacturing of Electric Vehicles (FAME) program has facilitated the adoption of over 1.5 million electric vehicles, reducing carbon emissions (Ministry of Heavy Industries, 2023).

iv). Healthcare and Education Reforms: In healthcare (SDG 3), the Ayushman Bharat scheme has provided free medical coverage to over 500 million people, making it

the world's largest public healthcare initiative (Ministry of Health and Family Welfare, 2023). In education (SDG 4), the Samagra Shiksha Abhiyan has improved school infrastructure, and the National Education Policy (NEP) 2020 aims to increase the Gross Enrolment Ratio to 50% by 2035 (Ministry of Education, 2023)^[3].

- v). **Women's Empowerment and Social Welfare:** To enhance SDG 5 (Gender Equality), the Beti Bachao Beti Padhao initiative has improved the child sex ratio from 918 (2015) to 931 (2023) (Ministry of Women and Child Development, 2023)^[7]. The Pradhan Mantri Matru Vandana Yojana has provided ₹12,000 crore in maternity benefits to over 10 million women since its launch (Ministry of Finance, 2023)^[4].
- vi). **The Way Forward:** While India's policy efforts have yielded substantial results, greater investments, improved governance, and strengthened public-private partnerships are essential for achieving all SDGs. Ensuring that policies are effectively implemented across all states will be key to sustainable and inclusive development.

6. Progress and Achievements in India's SDG Journey

India has made significant progress in its journey toward achieving the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). Over the years, various policy initiatives, economic reforms, and social programs have contributed to improvements in multiple SDG indicators. While challenges remain, key achievements in poverty reduction, healthcare, education, clean energy, and gender equality reflect India's commitment to the 2030 Agenda.

- i). **Poverty Reduction and Economic Growth:** India has witnessed a remarkable decline in poverty levels over the past decade. According to the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP, 2023)^[11], 415 million people were lifted out of multidimensional poverty between 2005 and 2022. The poverty rate fell from 37% in 2005 to 11.8% in 2022, marking one of the fastest declines globally. Government schemes like MGNREGA and Jan Dhan Yojana have played a crucial role in improving economic security for millions. Additionally, India's GDP growth rate stood at 7.2% in 2022-23, reinforcing progress towards SDG 8 (Decent Work and Economic Growth) (Ministry of Finance, 2023)^[4].
- ii). **Improvements in Healthcare and Well-being:** In line with SDG 3 (Good Health and Well-being), India has enhanced healthcare accessibility through initiatives such as Ayushman Bharat, which has provided over 40 million free treatments since its launch in 2018 (Ministry of Health and Family Welfare, 2023). Maternal and infant mortality rates have significantly declined, with maternal mortality dropping from 130 per 100,000 live births in 2014 to 97 in 2023 (WHO, 2023). The COVID-19 vaccination drive was another milestone, administering over 2.2 billion doses, the largest vaccination program globally (UNICEF, 2023)^[12].
- iii). **Advancements in Education and Literacy:** India has made strides in SDG 4 (Quality Education) by increasing school enrolment and literacy rates. The National Education Policy (NEP) 2020 aims to achieve a 100% Gross Enrolment Ratio (GER) in school education by 2030. As of 2023, India's literacy rate has risen to 77.7%, with female literacy improving to 70.3% (Ministry of Education, 2023)^[3]. Initiatives like Samagra Shiksha Abhiyan and PM e-Vidya have enhanced access to education, particularly in rural areas.

- iv). **Growth in Clean Energy and Climate Action:** India has made commendable progress in clean energy adoption, aligning with SDG 7 (Affordable and Clean Energy) and SDG 13 (Climate Action). Renewable energy capacity has expanded significantly, with solar and wind energy accounting for 42% of total installed power capacity (Ministry of New and Renewable Energy, 2023)^[6]. Additionally, the country has pledged to achieve net-zero carbon emissions by 2070 and reduce its carbon intensity by 45% by 2030 under the Paris Agreement.
- v). **Gender Equality and Social Inclusion:** Efforts toward SDG 5 (Gender Equality) have resulted in notable achievements. Women's participation in the workforce has risen to 27% in 2023, though still below global averages (ILO, 2023)^[2]. The Beti Bachao Beti Padhao initiative has improved the child sex ratio to 931 per 1,000 males, compared to 918 in 2015 (Ministry of Women and Child Development, 2023)^[7]. Additionally, 33% of parliamentary seats are now reserved for women, promoting political representation (Election Commission of India, 2023)^[1].
- vi). **The Way Forward:** While India has achieved substantial progress, sustained efforts in economic equity, healthcare access, environmental sustainability, and digital inclusion are crucial. Strengthening public-private partnerships, leveraging technology, and ensuring effective policy implementation will be key to achieving all SDG targets by 2030.

Conclusion

India's journey toward achieving the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) has been marked by significant progress, strategic policy interventions, and large-scale social reforms. The country has made commendable strides in poverty reduction, healthcare, education, renewable energy adoption, and gender equality, demonstrating its commitment to the 2030 Agenda. With initiatives such as Ayushman Bharat, MGNREGA, Beti Bachao Beti Padhao, and the National Solar Mission, India has improved living standards for millions while addressing key socio-economic and environmental challenges (NITI Aayog, 2023)^[9].

Despite these advancements, several challenges remain. Income inequality persists, with the top 10% of the population owning over 77% of the national wealth (Oxfam, 2023)^[10]. Climate change threats, water scarcity, and urban pollution pose risks to sustainable development. While renewable energy capacity has reached 42% of total power generation, accelerating the transition to a low-carbon economy remains a priority (Ministry of New and Renewable Energy, 2023)^[6]. Education and employment disparities continue to require attention. Although India's Gross Enrolment Ratio (GER) in higher education has risen to 28.4%, skill development programs must be enhanced to align with the changing job market (Ministry of Education, 2023)^[3]. Similarly, women's labour force participation stands at only 27%, highlighting the need for gender-sensitive employment policies (ILO, 2023)^[2].

To achieve the SDG targets by 2030, India must strengthen governance frameworks, enhance financial investments, and promote multi-stakeholder collaborations. Leveraging technology, data-driven policymaking, and sustainable industrial practices will be critical for long-term growth. Public-private partnerships, increased international cooperation, and community-driven initiatives can further accelerate progress.

Overall, India's SDG journey is a testament to its resilience and commitment to sustainable development. With continued policy innovation, financial inclusion, and climate-conscious strategies, the country has the potential to emerge as a global leader in sustainable growth, ensuring a prosperous and equitable future for all.

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