India's Focus on Sustainable Development Goals and Its Human Development – Issues and Challenges

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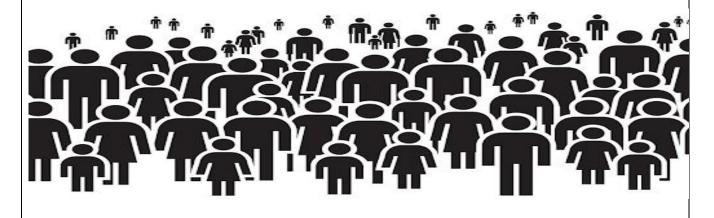
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"We have not inherited the world from our forefathers — we have borrowed it from our children."- Lester R. Brown, An American Environmental Analyst

Abstract

On 9th & 10th September, 2023, New Delhi hosted the G-20 Summit, which focused on accelerating the full and effective implementation of the *UN Agenda 2030* for Sustainable Development. Following this, an *'SDG Summit'* was convened at the United Nations headquarters on 18th & 19th September, 2023, to review and assess the implementation of the Agenda and the progress made on the *17 Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs).* Building on the outcomes of the 2023 SDG Summit, a '*Summit of the Future'* took place at the UN headquarters from 23rd & 24th September, 2024, where member nations reiterated their commitments. In this context, it is pertinent to examine India's progress in human development since 1990, based on the *UNDP's* latest Human Development Report *(HDR).* As Nobel laureate *Amartya Sen* noted in his book '*Development as Freedom,'* development is a process of expanding the real freedoms that people can enjoy. In his *'Capability Approach,'* he emphasizes that the core concern of human development is our ability to lead lives we have reason to value. Achieving freedom from hunger and ill health, along with promoting gender and income equality and ensuring access to quality education, contributes to human development and, consequently, to sustainable development.

This article spreads light on the key goals, issues, challenges, and initiatives to achieve SDGs and furtherance of human development in India in association with member countries.

Key words: Sustainable Development, Human Development, United Nations, Global Goals.

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Introduction

In 1984, the United Nations **(UN)** established an independent group consisting of 22 individuals from both developing and developed countries. This group was tasked with identifying long-term environmental strategies for the international community. The report produced by the World Commission on Environment and Development, titled **"Our Common Future" (World Commission on Environment and Development (WCED) - 1987),** is widely regarded as pivotal in bringing the concept of sustainable development into the political discourse of international development. The report extensively uses the term "sustainable development," defining it as "Development that meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs". For the first time, the Commission examined environmental issues arising from development processes through an economic, social, and political lens, rather than solely from a scientific perspective, as had been done in previous studies. Their recommendations emphasized the integration of development strategies with environmental policies and the establishment of global partnerships to address the interconnected environmental challenges and development opportunities faced by both the North and South.

Literally, sustainable development refers to maintaining development over time. However, there are possibly hundreds of definitions of the term currently in study, many divergent interpretations and thousands of variations applied in practice **(Gibson, 2005).**

'In principle, such an optimal (sustainable growth) policy would seek to maintain an "acceptable" rate of growth in per-capita real incomes without depleting the national capital asset stock or the natural environmental asset stock.'   *(Turner, 1988: 12)*

'The net productivity of biomass (positive mass balance per unit area per unit time) maintained over decades to centuries.'   *(Conway, 1987: 96)*

'Development that meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs.'   *(WCED, 1987: 43)*

'A sustainable society is one in which peoples' ability to do what they have good reason to value is continually enhanced.'   *(Amartya Sen, 1999)*

Gibson (2005) has conceptualised the sustainable development as:

● A challenge to conventional thinking and practice.

● About long-term and short-term well-being.

● Comprehensive, covering all the core issues of decision-making.

● Recognition of the links and interdependencies, especially between humans and the biophysical foundations for life.

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- Embedded in a world of complexity and surprise, in which precautionary approaches are necessary.

- Recognition of both inviolable limits and endless opportunities for creative innovation.

- About an open-ended process, not a state.

- About intertwined means and ends – culture and governance as well as ecology, society and economy.

- Both universal and context dependent.

'Sustainable development' could probably be otherwise called 'equitable and balanced' meaning that, in order for development to continue indefinitely, it should balance the interests of different groups of people, within the same generation and among generations, and do so simultaneously in three major interrelated areas – economic, social, and environment. So sustainable development is about equity, defined as equality of opportunities for well-being, as well as about comprehensive of objectives **(Tatyana P. Soubbotina, 2004 – 9-10).** Sustainable development goes beyond mere economic growth; it focuses on expanding the freedoms and capabilities of every individual, ensuring that no one is left behind in the pursuit of progress. Recent international summits on sustainable development emphasize the need for a collective global effort to achieve the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) by 2030.

Sustainable Development in India

At the heart of the 2030 Agenda are the 17 Global Goals and their 169 targets, driven by the unwavering principle of '**Leaving No One Behind' (LNOB).** This agenda, which has garnered unanimous support, is our definitive commitment to the future of our planet and a clear demonstration of the political will necessary to build strong partnerships among all countries and stakeholders in the pursuit of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). The SDGs are not just suggestions, they are integrated and indivisible, addressing the critical social, environmental, and economic dimensions we must tackle. They apply universally, compelling all nations whether upper-income, middle-income, or low-income to actively improve the lives of their citizens. In a world fraught with geopolitical tensions and intensifying climate crises, the need for the SDGs is more pressing than ever. They represent one of the vital platforms upon which every country must unite to forge a better world. Having already passed the midpoint of the 2030 deadline, it is imperative for all nations both poorer and wealthier to ramp up their efforts and revise their national strategies to accelerate progress toward the SDGs. Immediate action is necessary to realize the vision collectively shared for a sustainable future.

India stands firmly committed to the 2030 Agenda, as articulated by the Hon'ble Prime Minister at the United Nations Sustainable Development Summit 2015. He emphasized that our vision for the 2030 Agenda is not only ambitious but also encompasses comprehensive goals. This agenda decisively prioritizes enduring issues that have persisted for decades and embodies our deepening understanding of the social, economic, and environmental interconnections that shape our lives.

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Despite a global commitment to sustainable development, the Global SDG Progress Report 2024 indicates that only 17 percent of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) targets are on track. Progress on 50 percent of the targets is weak and insufficient, while 30 percent have stalled or even gone into reverse. Countries face several persistent challenges in their efforts to meet the SDGs. For instance, food, energy, and water security are threatened by human development pressures and a continuous demand for resources. Furthermore, climate change, ecosystem degradation, and pollution pose significant global environmental risks that hinder efforts to reduce poverty. Gender inequality also remains a pervasive issue, obstructing progress across all SDGs. These challenges have negatively affected the hard-won gains made in advancing the SDGs. Moreover, systemic issues, such as the availability and reliability of data, lack of capacity and technical expertise, inadequate planning and monitoring processes, and limited access to financial resources, further impede the achievement of these goals.

India and Sustainable Development Goals

As the world's most populous nation, India stands at the forefront of global efforts to achieve the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). Understanding this critical role, India has passionately committed to the 2030 Agenda, demonstrating its commitment to sustainable development on a global scale. The Government of India embodies its vision for inclusive and sustainable growth through the motto *'Sabka Saath, Sabka Vikas' (Together with all, Development for all).* With this committed mission, India not only aligns with the SDG framework but also reinforces the essential principle of leaving no one behind, ensuring a brighter future for all its citizens.

The Government of India has taken the following initiatives to achieve the SDGs:

Goal 1: No Poverty

Poverty encompasses not only a lack of income but also insufficient access to education, healthcare, and basic infrastructure. Addressing poverty necessitates comprehensive approaches that empower marginalized section of the society. To achieve this goal, the Govt has implemented the schemes:

- Pradhan Mantri Awas Yojana (PMAY)
- Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Act (MGNREGA)
- Jan Dhan Yojan

Goal 2: Zero Hunger

Ensuring food security involves increasing food production while also facilitating access and proper utilization. This goal highlights the importance of sustainable agricultural practices, resilience to climate change, and minimizing food waste across the supply chain. The initiatives of the Govt in this regard are:

- Pradhan Mantri Krishi Sinchai Yojana (PMKSY)
- Public Distribution System (PDP)
- Integrated Child Development Services (ICDS)

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Gaol 3: Good Health and Well-being

Accessible healthcare, proactive preventive measures, and a focus on social causes of health are essential for a thriving society. The COVID-19 pandemic has strongly demonstrated the insistence of building resilient healthcare systems and fostering global collaboration to effectively prevent and control diseases. This goals mainly focuses on promoting overall physical and mental health, reducing maternal and child mortality, and combating communicable diseases. In this direction, the Govt has introduced the following schemes:

- Ayushman Bharat
- Janani Suraksha Yojana (JSY)
- National Health Mission (NHM)

Goal 4: Quality Education

Quality education is an integral part of socio-economic deplanement of the nation. It equips the individuals with sophisticated skills and knowledge required for sustainable development, promoting innovation and empowering the communities. For achieving this goal, the following initiatives have been taken by the Govt:

- Right to Education Act
- Skill India Initiative
- Sarva Shikshana Abhiyan (SSA)

Goal 5: Gender Equality

Gender equality is a fundamental human right essential for a peaceful, prosperous, and sustainable world. This addresses the issues relating to harmful practices based on gender such as discrimination, violence, etc. To achieve the gender equality, the under mentioned schemes have been implemented by the Govt:

- Beti Bachao Beti Padhao (BBBP)
- Protection of Women from Domestic Violence Act
- Reservation Policies in Local Governance

Goal 6: Clean Water and Sanitation

Access to clean water and sanitation is crucial for good health, education, and overall well-being of the people of the nation. Protecting these crucial resources is especially important for vulnerable sections of the society that rely on them for a better future. To address these issues, the Govt has introduced the following schemes:

- Jal Jeevan Mission (JJM)
- Swachh Bharat Mission

Goal 7: Affordable and Clean Energy

Adopting sustainable energy solutions not only addresses climate change but also significantly reduces pollution and opens up new economic opportunities for public. This goal promotes accessibility to reasonable, reliable, sustainable and modern energy for all in the country. Therefore, the Govt has implemented the following:

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- National Solar Mission
- Saubhagya Scheme

Goal 8: Decent Work and Economic Growth

The aim of this goal is to address the issues such as unemployment, underemployment, and informal labour in the country. Decent work opportunities are crucial for poverty alleviation and building a resilient economy. To make this goal come true, the Govt has taken the following initiatives:

- Make in India
- Pradhan Mantri Mudra Yojana (PMMY)
- Start-up India

Goal 9: Industry, Innovation and Infrastructure

The major focus of this goal is building resilient infrastructure, promotion of inclusive industrialization and fostering technological innovation for strong socio-economic growth. The initiatives taken to achieve these are:

- Bharat Mala Project
- National Manufacturing Policy

Goal 10: Reduced Inequalities

This goal confronts the critical issues of income inequality, social exclusion, and unequal access to essential resources and opportunities. Addressing these disparities is imperative and demands targeted policy interventions, robust social protection programs, and a commitment to inclusive economic growth strategies. The schemes implemented by the Govt to achieve this goal are:

- Direct Benefit Transfer (DBT)
- Affirmative Action Policies

Goal 11: Sustainable Cities and Communities

It is to ensure safe, resilient and sustainable human settlements in a particular place and addressing the issues such as inadequate housing facilities, insufficient and unscientific urban planning, and slum areas. The Govt has announced various programs in its budgets to accomplish this goal and ensure sustainable cities and communities. They are:

- Smart City Mission
- Atal Mission for Rejuvenation and Urban Transformation (AMRUT)

Goal 12: Responsible Consumption and Production

Combatting waste generation, pollution, and the inefficient use of natural resources are the major focuses of this goal. Embracing responsible consumption means fostering awareness, advocating for sustainable lifestyles, and motivating businesses to implement eco-friendly practices for sustainable development. To realize this goal, the Govt has come out with the following actions:

- National Action Plan on Climate Change (NAPCC)

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- Swachh Bharath Mission

Goal 13: Climate Action

The essential steps to significantly mitigate greenhouse gas emissions, adapting to the effects of climate change, and strengthening climate resilience are embedded in this goal. Addressing climate change demands robust international collaboration, unified policy strategies, and cutting-edge technology to successfully transition to a sustainable low-carbon economy. Therefore, the Govt has signed agreements with international bodies to achieve this goal. They are:

- National Determined Contributions (NDCs) under Paris Agreement
- National Action Plan on Climate Change (NAPCC)

Goal 14: Life Below Water

It is vital for addressing the critical issues of overfishing, marine pollution, and habitat destruction. Protecting marine ecosystems preserves biodiversity and supports the livelihoods of millions who rely on our oceans and coasts. For enhancing port connectivity, sustainable marine development, and aquaculture, the Govt has successfully implemented the following schemes:

- Sagar Mala Project
- Blue Revolution

Goal 15: Life on Land

Its focus is on addressing the issues such as deforestation, desertification, and loss of biodiversity. Safeguarding terrestrial ecosystems is crucial for climate regulation, biodiversity conservation and the well-being of both humans and wildlife on the land. In this direction, the following programs are implemented:

- Green India Mission
- Pradhan Mantri Krishi Sinchai Yojana (PMKSY)

Goal 16: Peace, Justice and Strong Institutions

Addressing the issues like corruption, violence, and lack of access to justice and creating a peaceful atmosphere in the country for sustainable environment is a key agenda of this goal. To make the people to thrive, innovate and collaborate, the following bodies have been set-up in the country:

- National Legal Services Authority (NALSA)
- E-Courts Mission Mode Project (Digitized Judiciary)

Goal 17: Partnerships for the Goals

Partnerships with International Bodies, Private Sectors etc., are essential for mobilizing various resources, sharing of sophisticated knowledge, and leveraging expertise to address complex global challenges and issues are need of the hour. In this way, the Govt has entered in partnership with various bodies and they are:

- International Solar Alliance (ISA)
- UNICEF

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India's Progress in Human Development

According to the Human Development Report, 2023, entitled "Breaking the Gridlock: Reimagining Cooperation in a Polarised World," Human Development Index (HDI) Rating of India has improved. The key highlights of the report are:

- **HDI Improvement** – Improved from 0.633 in 2021 to 0.644 in 2022.

- **Indicators for Improvement** – Life Expectancy climbed from 67.2 to 67,7 years; Schooling reached 12.6 mean years increased to 6.67 years; Gross National Income (GNI) per capita increased from $ 6,542 to $ 6,951.

- **Gender Equality Progress** – Gender Inequality Index (GII) value has improved to 0.437.

- **Global Economic Concentration and Inequality** – More than 40% of the world trade is concentrated in three or fewer countries. In 2021, the market capitalization of the top notch three corporations surpassed the GDP of more than 90% of the countries truly reflecting economic concentration.

Comparative Analysis with Neighbouring Countries

In the recent years, the country has implemented several strategies to achieve an expected level of human development. However, the progress of the country has been slower when compared to some of the neighbouring countries. The highlights of the comparative analysis are:

- India currently ranks 134 out of 193 countries in the HDR 2023-24, placing it within the medium human development category.

- While this ranking shows some improvement, it falls in comparison to the significant advancements made by several countries in the region.

- For instance, Malaysia (63), Thailand (66), and China (75) boast much higher Human Development Index (HDI) ranks.

- Moreover, countries like Sri Lanka (78), Indonesia (112), Bhutan (125), and Bangladesh (129), which face similar socio-economic obstacles, have outperformed India in recent years.

- The key to their success lies in targeted investments in health and education, along with inclusive growth policies that benefit all citizens.

- This relative lag underscores the urgent need for India to implement structural reforms and effective policy interventions aimed at significantly elevating human development indicators.

- Now is the time for decisive action to ensure a brighter future for all.

Factors Contributing to India's Progress in Human Development

- **Economic Liberalization** – The economic liberalisation, government welfare programs, increased investments in human resources, and other innovative programs of India have led to

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rapid economic growth, job creation, substantial increase in income levels, better access to healthcare, education and other essential services.

- **Government Initiatives in Key Sectors –** Programs and schemes like MGNREGA, Pradhan Mantri Awas Yojana, Right to Education, National Health Mission, etc have significantly contributed to increase in employment generation, standard of living, gross enrolment ratio of students, healthcare, and life expectancy over the last few years. This is a great indication of human development in India.

Challenges to Further Progress in Human Development

India has many challenges to augment the human development further in coming years. In the way of human development, India has to introduce innovative strategies to level its development to global standards.

- **Uneven Distribution of Development Benefits**

A major challenge that India face is the unequal distribution of development benefits across regions and social groups. While metropolitan areas and southern states like Kerala and Tamil Nadu have achieved significant progress in health, education, and living standards, many northern and eastern regions are falling behind. This inequality is evident in Human Development Index (HDI) rankings, where states like Bihar and Uttar Pradesh show consistently lower outcomes than their southern counterparts. Addressing this gap is essential for ensuring inclusive national progress.

- **Raising Income Equality**

The Human Development Report **(HDR)** reveals an upsetting income disparity in India, where the wealthiest 1% hold **21.7%** of total income. This is significantly higher than neighbouring countries like Bangladesh **(11.6%)**, China **(15.7%),** and Bhutan **(18.1%),** as well as global averages **(17.5%)** and the South Asia average **(19.6%).** India's income inequality also exceeds that of East Asia and the Pacific **(16.5%)** and Europe and Central Asia **(15.7%),** highlighting the crucial need for policy reforms.

- **Standard of Education and Healthcare**

Access to education and healthcare has improved, however, quality remains a concern. Many rural schools still face teacher shortages and poor infrastructure, impacting student success. Similarly, remote healthcare facilities are often understaffed and lack essential resources. Therefore, India must prioritize enhancing the quality of these services to support all communities effectively.

- **Gender Inequality**

Women's participation in the workforce is alarmingly low at 28.3%, resulting in a significant gap of 47.8 percentage points compared to men at 76.1%. This disparity is particularly stark

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compared to neighbouring countries like China **(53.6%),** Bhutan **(53.5%),** and Bangladesh **(39.2%).** The Periodic Labour Force Survey (PLFS) for **2022-23** shows a slight improvement, with female participation increasing from 23.3% in 2017-18 to 37% 2022-23. However, a troubling urban-rural divide remains; rural women's participation rose from 24.6% to 41.5%, while urban women only increased from 20.4% to 25.4%. in 2022-23. This situation demands vital, targeted policies to bridge the rural-urban divide and empower women to thrive at the workforce.

Conclusion

Sustainable development is not merely about economic growth; it is a vital commitment to enhancing the freedoms and capabilities of every individual, ensuring that no one is left behind in the pursuit of progress. The recent international summits on sustainable development have emphasized the high priority need for a united global effort to achieve the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) by 2030. By strategically aligning its development policies with the objectives of the SDGs, India can pave the way for a more equitable and prosperous future for all its citizens, fostering a society where everyone thrives.

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