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Kriti Singh

Research Scholar, Department
of Political Science, University
of Allahabad, Uttar Pradesh,
India

A decade of sustainable development goals: India's progress, challenges, and policy pathways toward 2030

Kriti Singh

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Abstract

The Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), adopted by the United Nations in 2015, symbolize a global commitment to eradicating poverty, reducing inequality, and promoting environmental sustainability. A decade into implementation, India's experience assumes global significance owing to its demographic weight, policy leadership, and development scale. This paper critically examines India's progress in advancing the SDGs over the past ten years, highlighting its institutional frameworks, key policy interventions, and sectoral achievements in areas such as poverty reduction, renewable energy, education, and gender equality. While India's progress reflects considerable achievements, enduring challenges such as inequality, climate vulnerability, and financing constraints continue to impede comprehensive success. The paper concludes that innovative governance, sustainable finance, and technological advancement will be essential in accelerating India's pathway toward achieving the 2030 Agenda.

Keywords: Sustainable development goals (SDGS), India, NITI Aayog, inclusive growth, climate action, poverty reduction, gender equality, renewable energy, policy innovation, global governance

Introduction

The adoption of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) in 2015 marked a transformative moment in global development discourse. Expanding upon the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs), the SDGs offered a holistic vision integrating economic, social, and environmental dimensions of sustainability. Comprising 17 goals and 169 targets, the SDGs call for universal action to eradicate poverty, reduce inequality, protect ecosystems, and promote peace and prosperity. The principle of 'Leave No One Behind' underscores their inclusivity and universality.

As the global community enters the final stretch toward 2030, assessing the first decade of SDG implementation becomes imperative. For India, the world's most populous democracy and a rapidly growing economy, this assessment carries global weight. India's developmental experience characterized by a mix of welfare expansion, digital innovation, and environmental challenges offers valuable insights into the complexities of implementing large-scale sustainability frameworks in diverse socio-economic contexts. This article evaluates India's progress in achieving the SDGs over the past ten years, highlighting major institutional reforms, sectoral achievements, and persisting challenges, while proposing strategic pathways for the decade ahead.

Institutional Framework and Policy Integration

India's approach to SDG implementation demonstrates a balance between central coordination and decentralized action. The National Institution for Transforming India ^[6] (NITI Aayog) serves as the nodal body overseeing policy alignment, coordination, and evaluation. The SDG India Index, launched in 2018, provides a comparative analysis of state performance, encouraging competitive and cooperative federalism. This index, updated annually, has become a vital policy tool for evidence-based planning and progress tracking. To ensure effective localization, India mapped SDG targets to existing national missions and flagship programmes. Initiatives like MGNREGA and the National Rural Livelihood Mission correspond to Goal 1 (No Poverty), Poshan Abhiyan and PM-KISAN to Goal 2 (Zero Hunger), and Ayushman Bharat to Goal 3 (Good Health and Well-being).

Corresponding Author:

Kriti Singh

Research Scholar, Department
of Political Science, University
of Allahabad, Uttar Pradesh,
India

Educational goals are advanced through the Samagra Shiksha Abhiyan and NEP 2020, while gender and environmental objectives are promoted through Beti Bachao Beti Padhao, Ujjwala Yojana, and the National Solar Mission. This systemic integration ensures that the SDGs are embedded within India's broader development architecture, linking global priorities to national realities.

India's Contributions to Advancing the SDGs

India's decade-long engagement with the SDGs has yielded visible progress across multiple dimensions. The country's model of blending technology-driven governance with grassroots participation stands as a global example of adaptive policymaking.

1. Poverty Reduction and Social Inclusion

India's poverty alleviation efforts have shown measurable results. NITI Aayog's Multidimensional Poverty Index (2023) ^[1] reveals that 135 million people exited multidimensional poverty between 2015-16 and 2019-21. The success of Direct Benefit Transfers (DBT) and the JAM trinity Jan Dhan, Aadhaar, and Mobile has revolutionized welfare delivery by minimizing leakages and improving efficiency. Flagship programmes like Pradhan Mantri Awas Yojana (PMAY) and the PM Garib Kalyan Anna Yojana have further strengthened social security and food access during crises such as the COVID-19 pandemic. Additionally, financial inclusion and digital empowerment have significantly improved through schemes such as PM Mudra Yojana and Stand-Up India, which provide credit access to small entrepreneurs, particularly women and marginalized communities. These measures collectively underscore India's success in aligning welfare programmes with the SDG vision of inclusive growth.

2. Renewable Energy and Climate Action

India's achievements in renewable energy have been globally recognized. The nation's installed renewable capacity surpassed 180 GW in 2024, and its commitment to achieving 500 GW of non-fossil fuel capacity by 2030 demonstrates long-term vision. The International Solar Alliance (ISA) ^[4], co-founded by India and France, now unites over 100 countries to promote solar energy deployment in developing economies. India's climate policies, including the National Hydrogen Mission and the LiFE (Lifestyle for Environment) campaign, emphasize sustainable consumption and production. Moreover, the Perform, Achieve and Trade (PAT) scheme and revised Nationally Determined Contributions (NDCs) reflect India's proactive role in global climate diplomacy. By pledging to reduce emissions intensity of GDP by 45% from 2005 levels and achieve net-zero emissions by 2070, India has emerged as a responsible environmental leader balancing growth with sustainability.

3. Health, Nutrition, and Education

India's progress in human development aligns closely with SDGs 3 and 4. The Ayushman Bharat-Pradhan Mantri Jan Arogya Yojana (PM-JAY) has expanded healthcare access to more than 500 million people, establishing one of the largest universal health coverage schemes globally. Complementary programmes under the National Health Mission and Swachh Bharat Mission have strengthened sanitation, hygiene, and primary care. The COVID-19

pandemic highlighted the importance of digital health initiatives such as eSanjeevani and CoWIN, which enhanced efficiency and resilience.

In education, NEP 2020 introduced reforms emphasizing inclusivity, early childhood learning, and skill development. Digital platforms like SWAYAM and Diksha have democratized education, bridging the urban-rural divide. The Poshan Abhiyan continues to improve nutritional outcomes, addressing maternal and child health challenges through community-level interventions.

4. Gender Empowerment and Social Justice

India's commitment to gender equality is visible through various national initiatives. Programmes such as Beti Bachao Beti Padhao, Ujjwala Yojana, and Mahila E-Haas have enhanced women's participation in education, entrepreneurship, and leadership. The Ujjwala Yojana, in particular, has reduced indoor air pollution while promoting women's health and dignity. Constitutional measures ensuring one-third reservation for women in Panchayati Raj Institutions have strengthened local governance and decision-making.

5. Sustainable Urbanization and Infrastructure

With urbanization rapidly increasing, India's focus on sustainable cities (Goal 11) is crucial. The Smart Cities Mission and AMRUT have promoted eco-friendly infrastructure, digital governance, and waste management systems. PMAY (Urban) has improved housing for low-income groups, while the Gati Shakti Master Plan integrates multi-modal infrastructure with sustainability considerations. These initiatives reflect India's commitment to balancing modernization with ecological responsibility.

Challenges in Achieving the SDGs

Despite commendable progress, India's path toward achieving the SDGs remains uneven. Persistent inequality, environmental degradation, data gaps, and financing shortfalls continue to constrain inclusive and sustainable development.

1. Inequality and Social Disparities

Economic inequality has widened despite poverty reduction. Oxfam's Inequality Report (2023) ^[2] notes that the top 10% of Indians hold 77% of national wealth. Regional disparities, caste-based exclusion, and limited employment opportunities for women exacerbate inequality, demanding more redistributive policies and inclusive labor reforms.

2. Climate Vulnerability

India is among the world's most climate-vulnerable nations, facing frequent floods, droughts, and extreme heat. The Global Climate Risk Index (2023) ^[3] ranked India among the top ten affected countries. Air pollution in urban centers such as Delhi and Kanpur continues to threaten public health and economic productivity. Strengthening adaptive capacity and resilience-building mechanisms remains a national priority.

3. Data and Monitoring Gaps

Reliable, disaggregated data are essential for evaluating SDG progress. However, many districts and local governments lack robust monitoring frameworks. Investments in digital infrastructure, real-time dashboards,

and open data systems will enhance transparency and evidence-based decision-making.

4. Financing Constraints

The financial requirements for achieving the SDGs are immense. UN ESCAP (2023) ^[3] estimates India's annual financing gap at USD 500 billion. While public funding has increased, mobilizing private capital through green bonds, ESG investments, and impact funds remains crucial. International partnerships and concessional financing mechanisms can further support India's SDG financing landscape.

The Way Forward

To realize the 2030 Agenda, India must intensify multi-level collaboration and policy coherence. Strengthening Panchayati Raj Institutions for localized SDG planning can improve accountability. Enhancing partnerships with private entities, academia, and civil society will ensure innovation and inclusivity.

Promoting green technology, expanding renewable energy investments, and mainstreaming climate adaptation in all sectors will help balance growth with sustainability. Education for sustainable development and behavioral transformation through initiatives like LiFE will promote citizen-led action. Ultimately, India's journey must be driven by equity, evidence, and environmental ethics.

Conclusion

Ten years into the SDG journey, India stands at a pivotal juncture. Its accomplishments in renewable energy, poverty alleviation, health coverage, and digital governance demonstrate strategic leadership. However, entrenched inequalities, environmental stress, and financial gaps continue to test policy resilience. The next five years must therefore focus on accelerating implementation through innovation, inclusivity, and international cooperation. India's success in achieving the SDGs will not only shape its national future but also determine the global trajectory toward sustainable and equitable development.

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