

Implementing the SDGs in India: Poverty and Hunger

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Abstract

For most of the 20th century policy makers had been preoccupied with economic development. Holistic and sustainable development encompasses a range of social, economic, and environmental factors. The 17 Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) and associated 169 targets were adopted by the United Nations General Assembly at the start of its 70th Session in September 2015 with effect from 1st January 2016. Though not legally binding, the SDGs have become de facto international obligations with the potential to reorient the domestic priorities of countries during the subsequent fifteen years. Countries are expected to take ownership and establish national frameworks for achieving these Goals.

The 2030 Agenda that encompasses the SDGs also underscores that quality, reliable and disaggregated data would be needed for measurement of progress on the targets and to ensure that No One is Left Behind. The overall aim of writing this paper is to assess the trajectory of sustainable development in India in general, with a specific focus on two of the 17 SDGs, namely: Goal 1: End poverty in all its forms everywhere; and Goal 2: Zero hunger.

Introduction:

India's Prime Minister Narendra Modi in his speech at the United Nations Sustainable Development Summit in September 2015 said: "Much of India's development agenda is mirrored in the Sustainable Development Goals. Our national plans are ambitious and purposeful; Sustainable development of one-sixth of humanity will be of great consequence to the world and our beautiful planet."

The Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) were born at the United Nations Conference on Sustainable Development in Rio de Janeiro in 2012. The objective was to produce a set of universal goals that meet the urgent environmental, political and economic challenges facing the world. The SDGs are a bold commitment to finish what the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs)¹ started, and tackle some of the more pressing challenges.

In 2015, the United Nations General Assembly adopted the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development. 193 member countries, including India, got committed to the 17 Sustainable Development Goals and associated 169 targets that require efforts to end all forms of poverty, fight inequalities and tackle climate change while ensuring that 'No One is Left Behind'². India played a significant role in making the declaration and its progress in achieving these goals are

¹ The Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) were eight [international development goals](#) for the year 2015 that had been established following the [Millennium Summit](#) of the [United Nations](#) in 2000, following the adoption of the [United Nations Millennium Declaration](#).

² <http://www.mospi.gov.in/overview-sdgs>

crucial for the world as it is home to about 17% of the world population. The SDG India index, released by the NITI Aayog and the United Nations, shows that the nation has a score of 58, a little beyond halfway mark in meeting the target set for 2030.

In the context of India, as well as in many other postcolonial developing countries, poverty eradication has been high on the agenda for policy making. Paucity of resources and poverty led to lack of purchasing power resulting in a widespread hunger in developing economies. In India 70% of agricultural production depends on monsoon, poor monsoon has often led to widespread starvation. India is attaining self-sufficiency in food grain production yet India is home to a quarter of the hungry people in the world, and this is due to inequitable distribution of wealth and resources.

Poverty and hunger is the priority areas in the case of all developing countries. Poverty and hunger get further aggravated due to gender-based deprivation in a largely patriarchal society makes it even more challenging for developing countries. Being an overarching issue, gender provides an opportunity to engage in the discussion of issues that affect nearly half of the population.

Table-1³

YEAR	GHI SCORE OF India	RANK/No. of Countries
2014	17.8	55/76
2015	29.0	80/104
2016	28.5	97/118
2017	31.4	100/119
2018	31.1	103/119

Source: Computed by author

India's ranking in the global indices pertaining to poverty, hunger and the status of women has remained far from satisfactory over the past few decades despite the country's overall economic growth. As can be seen above in table-1, in 2015, the GHI score was 29.0 which improved to 28.5 in 2016. The following year, there was a plunge, with the score at 31.4. This improved subsequently to 31.1 in 2018. The country ranks no. 129 among the world's states on the Human Development Index in 2018 (HDI-see Table-2).

³ Higher the score, poorer the performance.

Table-2

Table-2

Date	Index	HDI Ranking
2018	0.647	129
2017	0.640	131
2016	0.630	130
2015	0.624	131
2014	0.616	132

Source: Computed by author

The two SDGs are selected in this paper as initial case studies because India seems to be particularly struggling with the effects of poverty and food insecurity, these are at the basis of achieving all other SDGs.

Importance of Sustainable Development:

"Sustainable development is the development that meets the needs of the present, without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs". The focus of sustainable development is far broader than just the environment. It's also about ensuring a strong, healthy and just society. This means meeting the diverse needs of all people in existing and future communities, promoting personal wellbeing, social cohesion, and inclusion, and creating equal opportunity.

The rampant growth of industry had adversely affected the environment and is also against the ethos of sustainable development. In 2018 we are 1.1 degrees above the pre-industrial temperature, by the end of the century the rise of the temperature could be 3 to 3.5 degree due to 'Green House Effect'.

NITI Aayog undertook the extensive exercise of measuring India and its States' progress towards the SDGs for 2030, culminating in the development of the first SDG India Index⁴. The Index has been constructed spanning across 13 out of 17 SDGs (leaving out Goals 12, 13, 14 and 17). It tracks the progress of all the States and Union Territories (UTs) on a set of 62 National Indicators, measuring their progress on the outcomes of interventions and schemes of the Government of India. The SDG Index Score for Sustainable Development Goals 2030 ranges between 42 and 69 for States and between 57 and 68 for UTs.

⁴ SDG India Index, Baseline Report 2018, Niti Aayog

Performance of States

- Among the States, Kerala and Himachal Pradesh are the front runners with an SDG India Index score of 69. Among the UTs, Chandigarh is a front-runner with a score of 68.
- Kerala's top rank is attributed to its superior performance in providing good health, reducing hunger, achieving gender equality and providing quality education.
- Himachal Pradesh ranks high in providing clean water and sanitation, in reducing inequalities and preserving mountain ecosystem.
- Among the UTs, Chandigarh takes the lead because of its exemplary performance in providing clean water and sanitation to its people.
- On the other hand states like Assam, Bihar and UP have featured badly in the index as their score was below 49

The Index can be useful to States/UTs in assessing their starting point on the SDGs in the following ways, by:-

- Supporting States/UTs to benchmark their progress against national targets and performance of their peers to understand the reasons for differential performance and devise better strategies to achieve the SDGs by 2030
- Supporting States/UTs to identify priority areas in which they need to invest and improve by enabling them to measure incremental progress.
- Highlighting data gaps related across SDGs for India to develop its statistical systems at the national and State levels.

SDGs and India's Commitment:

- For Climate Change Clean Fuel and several other measures with target dates are commitments of the GoI.
- India introduces BS-VI petrol and diesel. Delhi will be the first city to leapfrog from BS-IV to BS-VI. 13 major cities like Mumbai, Chennai, Bengaluru, etc. will make the shift from 1st Jan 2019. The rest of the country will make the change from April 2020 next year.
- No Plastics, India has pledged to eliminate all single-use plastic in the country by 2022.
- International Solar Alliance (ISA) is a group of 121 solar rich countries which are situated either on or between the tropics. Aims to deploy over 1000 GW of solar energy and mobilize more than \$1000 billion into solar power by 2030.
- To reduce the CO₂ emissions intensity of its GDP, by 33 to 35 percent by 2030 from 2005 level. To create an additional carbon sink of 2.5 to 3 billion tones of CO₂ equivalent through additional forest and tree cover by 2030. To achieve about 40 percent cumulative electric power installed capacity from non-fossil fuel based energy resources by 2030, with the help of transfer of technology and low-cost international finance, including from Green Climate Fund.

- By 2030, end hunger and ensure access by all people, in particular the poor and people in vulnerable situations, including infants, to safe, nutritious and sufficient food all year round. By 2030, end all forms of malnutrition, including achieving, by 2025, the internationally agreed targets on stunting and wasting in children under 5 years of age, and address the nutritional needs of adolescent girls, pregnant and lactating women and older persons
- By 2020, maintain the genetic diversity of seeds, cultivated plants and farmed and domesticated animals and their related wild species, including through soundly managed and diversified seed and plant banks at the national, regional and international levels, and promote access to and fair and equitable sharing of benefits arising from the utilization of genetic resources and associated traditional knowledge, as internationally agreed. By 2030, double the agricultural productivity and incomes of small-scale food producers, in particular women, indigenous peoples, family farmers, pastoralists and fishers, including through secure and equal access to land, other productive resources and inputs, knowledge, financial services, markets and opportunities for value addition and non-farm employment. By 2030, ensure sustainable food production systems and implement resilient agricultural practices that increase productivity and production, that help maintain ecosystems, that strengthen capacity for adaptation to climate change, extreme weather, drought, flooding and other disasters and that progressively improve land and soil quality
- Increase investment, including through enhanced international cooperation, in rural infrastructure, agricultural research and extension services, technology development and plant and livestock gene banks in order to enhance agricultural productive capacity in developing countries, in particular least developed countries
- Correct and prevent trade restrictions and distortions in world agricultural markets, including through the parallel elimination of all forms of agricultural export subsidies and all export measures with equivalent effect, in accordance with the mandate of the Doha Development Round, 2001.
- Adopt measures to ensure the proper functioning of food commodity markets and their derivatives and facilitate timely access to market information, including on food reserves, in order to help limit extreme food price volatility.

Objectives and Research Methodology:

The expansive nature of the topics covered that entailed critical understanding of factors that influence and perpetuate multidimensional poverty, widespread hunger and malnutrition. Largely, an analytical approach was adopted that involved critical review of official data available in the public domain. While there is a globally defined uniform framework of SDGs and corresponding targets, the research was undertaken with a focus on India. The status of the SDGs in other countries, their relevance and level of achievement is outside the purview of this research, while such a comparative analysis could be part of the research paper at some later stage.

Information was largely sourced from secondary sources that included official documents of UN agencies, the national and state governments and other public bodies. Targets and indicators for

the two selected SDGs were analysed in the country specific context with a view to ascertaining their relevance. A limited amount of primary data was used, mainly to corroborate the findings and support the arguments. Sources of primary data included interviews with experts and key people involved in the SDG planning and implementation process could be the part of this work. Although, owing to the limitations of time and financial resources, no primary data was actually collected as part of this paper, this paper is totally based on secondary data.

SDG implementation in India

India is a land of contradictions and disparities where poverty and prosperity, excessive food production and hunger, coexist. The world's largest democracy is home to the largest number of hungry people in the world and the largest number of children who are malnourished. Despite having made considerable progress in GDP growth. According to the World Bank, the Gini coefficient (a measurement of distribution of income across population) in India was 0.38 in 2011, having previously increased from 0.43 in 1995–96 to 0.45 in 2004–05.⁵ According to the 2015 World Wealth Report, India had 198,000 high net worth individuals (annual income over \$1 million) with a combined wealth of \$785 billion. And yet FAO estimates that 194.4 million people, equivalent to 14.5% of the population, are undernourished in India. Also, 51.4% of women in reproductive age between 15 to 49 years are anemic.⁶ The SDGs offer a framework for a more balanced and equitable growth.

The global indicator framework for the Sustainable Development Goals has been developed by the Inter-Agency and Expert Group on SDG Indicators (IAEG-SDGs) and agreed upon at the 48th session of the United Nations Statistical Commission held in March 2017. The global indicator framework includes 231 unique indicators.⁷ India is committed to the fulfillment of the SDGs, with the Ministry of Statistics and Programme Implementation (MoSPI) and the National Institute for Transforming India (NITI) Aayog the key government departments/agencies entrusted with the task to plan SDG implementation and monitoring. MoSPI also represents India at various UN forum concerning SDG-related statistical activities.

End Poverty in All its Forms Everywhere:

Rapid growth (SDG 8) is the key weapon in any country's arsenal to combat poverty. On the one hand, it creates well-paid jobs, which place necessary purchasing power in the hands of households to access food, clothing, housing, education and health. On the other, it brings ever-rising revenues to the government to finance social spending. India has continued its programme of economic reforms to achieve sustained rapid growth. The reforms have included fiscal

⁵ <https://data.worldbank.org/indicator/SI.POV.GINI?end=2011&locations=IN&start=2011&view=mapHigher> GINI Coefficient means higher inequalities.

⁶ <https://www.indiafoodbanking.org/hunger>

⁷ https://unstats.un.org/sdgs/indicators/Global%20Indicator%20Framework%20after%202020%20review_Eng.pdf However, twelve indicators repeat under two or three different targets

consolidation, inflation targeting, improved governance all around, accelerated infrastructure development (SDG 9), curbing of corruption (SDG 16), Aadhaar Act (for providing unique identity), Insolvency and Bankruptcy Act, Goods and Services Tax, further liberalization of foreign direct investment and closure of sick units in the public sector. As a result, today, India is the fastest growing major economy in the world. It grew 7.5% in fiscal year 2014-15, 8% during 2015-16 and 7.1 % during 2016-17 and once again a negative trend in 2017-18 i.e. 6.7%.

Currently, the official poverty line in India is the Tendulkar line given by Suresh Tendulkar. Rapid growth in Indian Economy due to economic reforms initiated in 1991 has led to significant reduction in poverty (figure-1). Between 1993-94 and 2003-04, the average annual rate was 6.2% and between 2004-05 and 2011-12, at the rate of growth of Indian Economy was 8.3%. Both these periods saw a substantial decline in poverty but the decline was significantly sharper between 2004-05 and 2011-12 characterized by faster growth in GDP and passing of Employment Guarantee Act. In this decade of growth India created history by bringing 13 Crore people above poverty line.

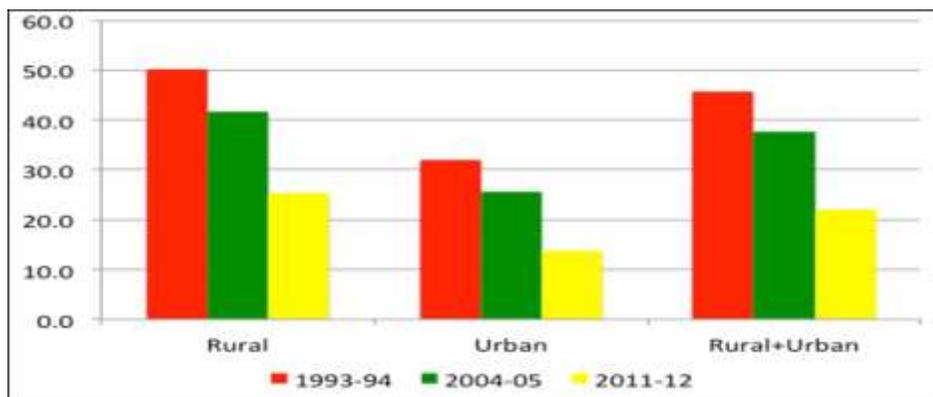
Anti-Poverty Programmes:

Growth has brought with it an increased volume of revenues, which, in turn, has enabled the government to sustain a high level of social spending, thus, targeting poverty directly.

An important anti-poverty program has focused on generating employment through public works the Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Act (MGNREGA) provides a legal guarantee of a minimum of 100 days of wage employment per household every year for unskilled workers in rural areas. The programme generated over 2 billion person-days of employment (SDG 8) during the last year 2017-18. Women and disadvantaged groups have been the largest beneficiaries (SDG 5 and SDG 10) of the programme accounting for 56% and 39% of person-days of work generated during last year.

Figure-1

Poverty in India at the Tendulkar Line



Further, the Deendayal Antyodaya Yojana, the National Livelihoods Mission, is devoted to creating skilled employment for the poor. The Mission aims to bring one female member each from a large number of poor households in rural areas into Self-Help Groups in a phased manner. In a significant move towards Addressing multi-dimensional poverty, data from the Socio-Economic Caste Census, 2011 is being used to identify beneficiaries for development programmes based on various deprivations suffered by households. This is aligned with the policy of ensuring that 'no one is left behind'.

Strengthening Social Safety Nets:

The National Social Assistance Programme provides pension to the elderly, widows and differently-able individuals. Additionally, three initiatives have been launched to facilitate access to life insurance, personal accident insurance as well as pension for workers in the unorganised sector. The schemes focusing on insurance have collectively reached out to 130 million subscribers.

Ensuring Access to Basic Services:

A direct consequence of poverty is food insecurity. To address this problem, the National Food Security Act provides a basic quantity of food grains to nearly 75% of the population in rural areas and 50% of the population in urban areas at affordable prices under the Targeted Public Distribution System. The programme provides 5 kg wheat or rice per person per month at subsidised prices. A related initiative provides the poorest households 35 kg of the subsidized wheat or rice every month.

Poverty and Hunger: Status in India

NITI Aayog released in December 2018 a SDG India Index: Baseline Report 2018 and Dashboard (SDG II 2018) prepared in collaboration with the United Nations and other stakeholders. The SDG II has been envisaged as a comprehensive index to measure progress of the states/UTs with respect to SDG implementation. The index was based on 62 priority indicators pertaining to 13 Goals and 39 Targets. This alignment of indicators was expected to pave the way for better coordination among government agencies for tracking India's performance on the SDGs.

Although data shows a decline in poverty levels over the years since 1993, it is estimated that 21.9% of the Indian population still live below the poverty line. The announced national target is to reduce that to 10.95 by the SDG target date of 2030 (NITI Aayog). In terms of status, there is extreme variation between states/UTs on awareness of or active policies towards implementing the SDGs, and this shows clearly in the data, incomplete as it is, on state performance in relation to SDG 1. Using the indicator of 100 as a complete achievement of the goal, Tamil Nadu ranks first with a score of 76, closely followed by Kerala (64), and the Northeastern states of Mizoram (71) and Tripura (71). Middle ranking states include Gujarat (48), Uttar Pradesh (48), Bihar (45), Madhya Pradesh (44), Karnataka (45), and lowest ranking ones include Jharkhand at just 37. Among Union Territories, Puducherry ranks high at 61, but the National Capital Territory (Delhi

and environs) comes in at just 30, and Dadra and Nagar Haveli comes in worst at a dismal 21. Interestingly, showing the interrelationship between the different but closely connected SDGs, the UT of Chandigarh, which scores high on some other SDGs, manages only 39 in poverty alleviation. Some small states/UTs have done well, with Goa now having only 5.09% of its population living in poverty, and Andaman and Nicobar reporting just 1%.

With about 195 million hungry people as per the estimates of the UN's Food and Agriculture Organisation (FAO), India doesn't seem to be on track to achieve SDG 2 by the year 2030. Targets especially pertaining to malnutrition – below-5 children who are underweight and stunted – are way behind where they should be, and a number of the targets are not even being tracked.

Although India has shown improvement in reducing child stunting, with 46.6 million stunted children the country is still home to over 30.9% of all stunted children under five years of age – the highest in the world. India, however, has shown no progress or declining parameters but still bears 23.8% of the global burden of malnourishment, and has the second-highest estimated number of undernourished people in the world after China, according to FAO.

Analysis done by India Spends shows that to achieve zero hunger by 2030 India will have to lift 48,370 people out of hunger every day. India's reduction in undernourished population from 2015 to 2017 was 3.9 million, which is about 10,685 people per day--less than one-fourth needed to meet the SDG target by 2030. Even at its highest reduction of undernourished population – 15.2 million in 2006-2008 – India could lift only 41,644 people per day out of hunger. One of the critical and earliest interventions to prevent malnutrition and disease in children is breast feeding; yet, only 54.9% of Indian babies are exclusively breastfed and only 41.6% of babies are breastfed in the first hour of birth, according to the Ministry of Health and Family Welfare's National Family Health Survey-4 (2015-16) India has made efforts to counter the trend of slowing decline in malnutrition rates. The Poshan Abhiyan - National Nutrition Mission aimed at reducing malnutrition in women and children was launched in March 2018 and operates under the aegis of NITI Aayog. India's average score on the NITI Aayog Index is 35 for Goal 2. Goa (76), Mizoram (75) and Kerala (74) top the list of states doing well on aggregate indices, while Bihar (26), Madhya Pradesh (24) and Jharkhand (22) are the tail enders. The majority of the states are lagging behind in achievement of SDG 2 and only 7 out of the total 30 seem to be inching closer to zero hunger.

Conclusion

17 Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) and associated 169 targets were adopted by the United Nations General Assembly at the start of its 70th Session in September 2015 with effect from 1st January 2016. The goal set by United Nation General Assembly for the holistic and sustainable development by 2030 for all the countries. India is committed to adopt this resolution and has formulated many policies in compliance of the resolution passed by 70th session of United Nations. India needs to develop innovative strategies and policy formulation in many aspects. India is not making any substantial progress in the field of poverty alleviation, lately our position has deteriorated in SDG1 this is a matter of concern for all the economists. It appears very unlikely that we will be able to meet our target that not more than 10% of population should remain below poverty line at international standard (earning \$1.25 a day) by 2030. The big

challenge before India is to deal with the states like Uttar Pradesh, Bihar and Madhya Pradesh; they are performing much below the national average in poverty alleviation.

India's performance on hunger index is also a matter of concern. India's ranking in the world is falling in every report on 'Hunger index'. India is a home of largest population in the world who are not getting one square meal a day. This is very astonishing that right to food (Food Security Act, 2013) as a constitutional right available, still India's ranking in hunger index is getting from bad to worse.

We can conclude from the facts and discussion presented in this paper is that it is not the policy that has failed us but it is political will that has brought us down. The implementation and delivery of the policy is another big challenge for India, i.e. the role of bureaucracy and red tapism.

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