Sustainable Development Goals and India: Evaluating Policy, Progress, and Pathways Forward

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Abstract

The United Nations Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), adopted in 2015 as part of the Agenda 2030, outline a global blueprint for achieving peace, prosperity, and environmental sustainability through 17 interconnected goals. These goals hold immense significance for developing countries like India, where sustainable development intersects with large-scale social, economic, and environmental challenges.

This Research evaluates India's commitment and progress in implementing key SDGs from 2016 to 2025, focusing on selected goals such as No Poverty (SDG 1), Good Health and Well-being (SDG 3), Quality Education (SDG 4), Gender Equality (SDG 5), Clean Water and Sanitation (SDG 6), and Climate Action (SDG 13). India's efforts, led institutionally by NITI Aayog and supported by numerous central and state-level schemes, demonstrate a strong policy framework and measurable advancements in several domains. However, disparities persist across regions and sectors, highlighting structural challenges and implementation gaps.

The research employs a descriptive and analytical methodology, drawing on secondary data from the NITI Aayog SDG Index (2018-2024), the UN SDG Global Reports, World Bank databases, and national surveys conducted by the Ministry of Statistics and Programme Implementation (MOSPI). Comparative analyses of state performances and sectoral progress provide deeper insights into India's SDG landscape.

Findings suggest that while India has made significant headway in poverty alleviation, rural sanitation, and renewable energy adoption, it continues to face critical barriers in areas such as healthcare accessibility, education quality, gender parity, and environmental resilience.

I. Introduction

In 2015, the world came together to adopt an ambitious global development agenda, the United Nations 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development. At its core lie 17 Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), encompassing a wide array of interconnected issues: from eradicating extreme poverty and hunger to ensuring inclusive education, gender equality, sustainable economic growth, and action against climate change. These goals serve as a blueprint for creating a more just, equitable, and sustainable future for all, irrespective of nationality, geography, or socioeconomic background.

For a country like India, home to over one-sixth of the global population, the SDGs are more than just aspirational targets they are urgent developmental necessities. India's diverse landscape, complex socio-economic structure, and persistent development challenges make its commitment to sustainable development both monumental in scale and critical in impact. From the bustling metropolises of Mumbai and Delhi to the rural heartlands of Bihar and Chhattisgarh, sustainable development is not merely a policy objective it is intimately tied to the everyday lives, opportunities, and dignity of millions.

Recognizing this, India was one of the first countries to align its national development agenda with the SDGs. Since 2016, the government has implemented a wide range of flagship schemes and institutional reforms, many of which reflect direct or indirect links to SDG targets. Whether it's Ayushman Bharat providing health insurance to vulnerable families, Jal Jeevan Mission ensuring clean drinking water in rural households, or Beti Bachao Beti Padhao challenging gender bias, these interventions reflect India's attempt to translate global goals into local action.

At the helm of this process is NITI Aayog, the national think tank that has evolved into the key coordinator for SDG monitoring and policy integration. Through instruments like the SDG India Index, it assesses progress at the state and union territory levels, encouraging healthy competition and providing policy insights. Yet, despite institutional commitment, significant hurdles remain: regional disparities, deep-seated inequalities, limited financial resources, environmental degradation, and the unexpected shockwaves of the COVID-19 pandemic, which disrupted progress across sectors like education, healthcare, and employment.

Amid this complex and evolving landscape, this research paper seeks to provide a mid-point evaluation of India's progress toward selected SDGs from 2016 to 2025. Rather than attempting to cover all 17 goals, the study focuses on six critical areas that reflect India's most pressing developmental priorities:

- **SDG 1** - No Poverty
- **SDG 3** - Good Health and Well-being
- **SDG 4** - Quality Education
- **SDG 5** - Gender Equality
- **SDG 6** - Clean Water and Sanitation
- **SDG 13** - Climate Action

Each of these goals speaks directly to the lived experiences of millions of Indians. Reducing poverty is not just about numbers, it's about securing basic human dignity. Health and education aren't just services; they are the foundations of human development. Gender equality isn't an abstract ideal; it's a daily struggle for rights, voice, and opportunity. And climate action is no longer tomorrow's concern it's today's reality, especially for the most vulnerable.

Through an in-depth exploration of policy interventions, institutional frameworks, and performance data, this paper aims to shed light on the realities, gaps, and possibilities that define India's journey toward the 2030 agenda.

Research Questions

1. Is India on track to achieve the Sustainable Development Goals by 2030?

2. What are the key policy interventions undertaken for selected SDGs, and what have been their tangible impacts?

3. What institutional and structural factors are enabling or hindering India's SDG progress across different regions?

Objectives of the Study

- To assess India's progress in achieving selected SDGs between 2016 and 2025, using both national and state-level indicators.

- To examine the role of institutional mechanisms such as **NITI Aayog**, state governments, and Panchayati Raj Institutions in the planning, implementation, and monitoring of SDG-related actions.

- To analyze **inter-state disparities** in SDG performance and understand the reasons behind the variation in outcomes.

- To identify **policy gaps, implementation bottlenecks**, and areas of opportunity for accelerating progress.

- To propose actionable, evidence-based **recommendations** that can inform both

policymakers and development practitioners working toward the 2030 Agenda.

countries have made moderate progress but are not on track to achieve all goals, especially in areas like climate action (SDG 13) and reducing inequalities

II. Literature Review

The Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) represent one of the most comprehensive global frameworks to address interconnected issues of poverty, inequality, education, health, climate change, and sustainable growth. Since their adoption in 2015, a growing body of international and national literature has explored the dynamics of SDG implementation, the role of developing nations, and India's specific progress. This section presents a review of the global and national landscape, while also identifying significant research gaps.

Global Perspective on SDG Implementation

The global literature on SDG implementation emphasizes both the transformative potential and the practical challenges of achieving the 17 goals by 2030. According to [1]**Sachs et al. (2023),** most

(SDG 10). One of the critical issues identified is the imbalance in progress: high-income countries tend to perform better on health and infrastructure-related goals, whereas low- and middle-income countries struggle due to weaker institutions and lack of data [2]**(United Nations, 2023).**

Moreover, researchers such as [3]**Leal Filho et al. (2020)** argue that the SDGs require context-specific adaptations, as the universal nature of the agenda often overlooks regional disparities, historical inequities, and socio-cultural complexities. The Voluntary National Reviews (VNRs) submitted by countries, while useful, have been criticized for being

[1] Sachs, J. D., Kroll, C., Lafortune, G., Fuller, G., & Woelm, F. (2023). *Sustainable Development Report 2023: Monitoring Progress on the SDGs*. Cambridge University Press.

[2] United Nations. (2023). *The Sustainable Development Goals Report 2023*. United Nations Publications.

[3] Leal Filho, W., Salvia, A. L., do Paço, A., & Brandli, L. (2020). Implementing and monitoring the sustainable development goals. *Springer Nature*.

self-congratulatory, lacking independent verification, and insufficiently addressing failures [4](**Fukuda-Parr & McNeill, 2019**).

Role of Developing Nations in the 2030 Agenda

Developing countries are at the epicenter of the SDG challenge, both in terms of need and opportunity. As [5]**Gupta and Vegelin (2016)** note, the SDGs offer a framework for inclusive and equitable growth, but also highlight contradictions: countries are asked to maintain economic growth while drastically reducing environmental impact often without the same resources as developed nations.

Studies point out that local governance, grassroots engagement, and participatory institutions are essential to localize the SDGs. However, in many developing nations, centralized planning and weak administrative capacity hinder meaningful localization [6](**Allen, Metternicht & Wiedmann, 2017**). This is particularly relevant to India, where local bodies such as Panchayati Raj Institutions are expected to play a role in SDG delivery but often lack adequate resources and training.

Past Studies on India's SDG Efforts

India's SDG progress has been studied extensively in recent years, largely driven by government initiatives and international partnerships. [7]**NITI Aayog's SDG India Index (2018, 2019, 2020, 2023)** has been a key tool for tracking state-level performance and fostering cooperative competition. According to [8]**Kumar and Bhattacharya (2020),** India's institutional framework especially NITI Aayog's coordination, has been effective in integrating the SDGs into national policies.

Several studies have analyzed India's flagship programs in relation to the SDGs. For instance,

[9]**Chatterjee and Bajaj (2021)** evaluated Swachh Bharat Abhiyan in improving sanitation (SDG 6), while [10]**Lahiri and Kumar (2020)** discussed Ayushman Bharat's contribution to universal health coverage (SDG 3). Similarly, [11]**Singh (2021)** analyzed the impact of Beti Bachao Beti Padhao and Ujjwala Yojana in advancing gender equality (SDG 5).

However, many of these studies rely heavily on quantitative performance indicators and government-published data, without delving deeply into impact assessments, field-based insights, or community-level perspectives. There is also a limited understanding of how state-level political priorities, administrative capacity, and social capital affect SDG outcomes.

Gaps in Current Literature and the Need for National Evaluation

Despite growing academic and policy interest, the literature reveals several gaps:

1. **Mid-term Evaluations (2016-2025)**: Few studies offer a comprehensive assessment of India's SDG progress at this halfway point toward 2030.

2. **Comparative State Analysis**: There is limited exploration into why some Indian states perform significantly better than others, despite similar schemes.

3. **Effectiveness of Policy Interventions**: Much of the current literature focuses on scheme implementation without rigorous evaluation of their **sustainability and long-term impact**.

4. **COVID-19 Disruption**: The pandemic's effects on health, education, employment, and migration are not fully accounted for in SDG analyses.

5. **Voices from Below**: There is a lack of **qualitative research** that captures the experiences and perceptions of marginalized communities, women, and rural populations regarding SDG-related schemes.

[4] Fukuda-Parr, S., & McNeill, D. (2019). Knowledge and politics in setting and measuring the SDGs: Introduction to special issue. *Global Policy, 10*(S1), 5–15.

[5] Gupta, J., & Vegelin, C. (2016). Sustainable development goals and inclusive development. *International Environmental Agreements: Politics, Law and Economics, 16*(3), 433–448.

[6] Allen, C., Metternicht, G., & Wiedmann, T. (2017). National pathways to sustainable development goals: A framework for stakeholder engagement and policy coherence. *Sustainability Science, 12*(5), 1177–1191. https://doi.org/10.1007/s11625-017-0457-0

[7] NITI Aayog. (2023). *SDG India Index and Dashboard 2023–24*. Government of India.

[8] Kumar, N., & Bhattacharya, D. (2020). India's institutional readiness for SDG implementation: Role of NITI Aayog. *Economic and Political Weekly, 55*(12), 15–19.

[9] Chatterjee, S., & Bajaj, S. (2021). Impact of Swachh Bharat Abhiyan on public health: Evidence from rural India. *Journal of Health Management, 23*(2), 243–258.

[10] Lahiri, T., & Kumar, R. (2020). Ayushman Bharat and the road to universal health coverage in India. *Indian Journal of Public Health, 64*(1), 1–4.

[11] Singh, R. (2021). Empowering women through policy: Evaluating Beti Bachao Beti Padhao and Ujjwala Yojana. *Gender and Development Studies, 29*(2), 101–118.

III. Methodology

To evaluate India's progress on selected Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) from 2016 to 2025, this study adopts a mixed-methods approach combining descriptive analysis, comparative evaluation, and policy review. The methodology is designed to provide both a macro-level national overview and a micro-level state-wise performance analysis. Given the diversity and scale of the Indian context, the study relies on secondary data sources that are credible, government-backed, and internationally recognized.

1. Research Design

The study follows a **descriptive-analytical research design**. It begins with a contextual overview of India's SDG commitments, institutional mechanisms, and policy interventions. It then assesses **quantitative progress** using official indicators and scores, while also engaging in **qualitative interpretation** of policy documents, program reports, and academic literature to understand outcomes and gaps.

2. Scope of the Study

Rather than covering all 17 SDGs, the study focuses on **six key goals** that are especially relevant for India's development trajectory:

- **SDG 1**: No Poverty
- **SDG 3**: Good Health and Well-being
- **SDG 4**: Quality Education
- **SDG 5**: Gender Equality
- **SDG 6**: Clean Water and Sanitation
- **SDG 13**: Climate Action

These goals were selected based on their critical significance to India's socio-economic challenges, their alignment with national flagship schemes, and the availability of consistent data for evaluation.

3. Data Sources

The analysis relies on **secondary data** from the following authoritative and publicly available sources:

1. **NITI Aayog's SDG India Index (2018–2024)**- for state-wise SDG performance rankings and trend data.
2. **United Nations SDG Reports** (2016–2023) - for global benchmarking and comparative insights.
3. **World Bank Open Data** – for macroeconomic and social indicators.
4. **Ministry of Statistics and Programme Implementation (MoSPI)** – for national-level progress tracking through the National Indicator Framework (NIF).
5. **National Sample Survey Office (NSSO) and NFHS Surveys** – for disaggregated data on health, education, gender, and household conditions.
6. **Government policy documents and flagship scheme evaluations** – such as those for Ayushman Bharat, Jal Jeevan Mission, Beti Bachao Beti Padhao, Swachh Bharat Abhiyan, and Ujjwala Yojana.

4. Analytical Tools and Techniques

- **Descriptive Statistical Analysis**: Progress on each SDG is measured using key indicators such as poverty rate, maternal and infant mortality, literacy rates, sanitation coverage, and renewable energy capacity.
- **Comparative State-wise Analysis**: States and Union Territories are categorized as *Front Runners*, *Performers*, *Aspirants*, or *Achievers* based on their SDG scores in the NITI Aayog Index. Differences across regions are analyzed to identify systemic gaps and best practices.
- **Trend Analysis (2016-2025)**: Progress over time is visualized using available datasets to show whether India is on track to meet SDG targets by 2030.
- **Policy Evaluation Framework**: Government schemes are evaluated based on their design, coverage, implementation challenges, and outcomes as reflected in SDG performance metrics.

5. Limitations of the Study

- **Data Availability**: Not all SDG indicators are updated annually or disaggregated at the district or block level, which limits the precision of the analysis.
- **COVID-19 Disruption**: Some indicators (especially in health and education) were affected by the pandemic, making trend analysis more complex for the 2020–2022 period.
- **Dependence on Secondary Data**: While all data sources are reliable, the study lacks primary field data or stakeholder interviews, which could provide more nuanced insights into local-level implementation.

6. Ethical Considerations

Since this research relies entirely on public and secondary sources, no human subjects were involved. All data has been used with proper academic citation and in accordance with open-access guidelines.

IV. India's Institutional Approach to SDGs

The successful realization of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) in India depends heavily on a robust and coordinated institutional framework. Recognizing the complexity and cross-sectoral nature of the SDGs, India has established a multi-level governance structure to ensure alignment with the UN Agenda 2030. This includes the central government, state governments, local bodies, and civil society working together to localize and implement the goals.

1. Role of NITI Aayog as the National Coordinator

NITI Aayog (National Institution for Transforming India) has been designated as the nodal agency to coordinate India's efforts towards achieving the SDGs. Since its inception, NITI Aayog has taken a leadership role in:

- **Mainstreaming SDGs into national planning** by aligning flagship schemes (such as Ayushman Bharat, Swachh Bharat Abhiyan, and PMAY) with specific SDG targets.

- **Monitoring and evaluation** by developing the **SDG India Index** and **dashboard** in partnership with UN agencies, technical bodies, and ministries.

- Facilitating **inter-ministerial coordination** and policy coherence to ensure that programs across sectors contribute to the SDGs.

- **Capacity building** and promoting knowledge-sharing through policy briefs, best practice documents, and regional workshops.

NITI Aayog functions not only as a coordinator but also as a **data curator**, continuously improving India's monitoring framework and promoting evidence-based policymaking.

2. SDG India Index: Purpose, Framework, and Methodology

Introduced in 2018, the **SDG India Index** is NITI Aayog's flagship tool to measure progress at the sub-national level. The Index:

- **Quantifies the SDG progress** of all States and Union Territories using a score ranging from 0 to 100.

- Categorizes states as **Aspirants (0–49), Performers (50–64), Front Runners (65–99),** and **Achievers (100)** based on their performance.

- Provides **goal-wise, state-wise disaggregation** of progress, helping in identifying regional gaps and strengths.

Methodology:
The Index is developed using data from government sources such as MoSPI, National Health Mission, NFHS, and state reports. It includes over 100 indicators across 17 SDGs and is updated annually.

The Index has become a **policy compass**, encouraging healthy competition among states, aligning state-level schemes with global goals, and supporting evidence-based governance.

3. Role of State Governments and Panchayati Raj Institutions (PRIs)

Recognizing India's federal structure, **state governments play a pivotal role** in the SDG ecosystem:

- States have been encouraged to **develop their own SDG Vision Documents** and **State Indicator Frameworks (SIFs)** aligned with national priorities.

- Many states (such as Kerala, Himachal Pradesh, Tamil Nadu) have institutionalized **SDG Cells** within Planning Departments or Finance Commissions.

- Capacity-building initiatives have been undertaken to **train local administrators and elected representatives** in integrating SDGs into district planning.

Panchayati Raj Institutions (PRIs) and **Urban Local Bodies (ULBs)** are at the frontlines of local service delivery. Efforts to localize SDGs include:

- Embedding SDGs in **Gram Panchayat Development Plans (GPDPs)**.

- **Decentralized monitoring** using citizen feedback and participatory planning.

- Pilot projects and **SDG localization toolkits** in collaboration with UNDP and state governments.

4. Voluntary National Reviews (VNRs): 2017, 2020, 2023

India has submitted **three Voluntary National Reviews (VNRs)** to the United Nations High-Level Political Forum (HLPF) on Sustainable Development:

- **2017 VNR**: Focused on *SDG 1 (No Poverty)*, *SDG 2 (Zero Hunger)*, *SDG 3 (Good Health)*, *SDG 5 (Gender Equality)*,

SDG 9 (Industry), *SDG 14 (Life Below Water)*, and *SDG 17 (Partnerships)*. It emphasized inclusivity and showcased flagship schemes.

- **2020 VNR**: Presented under the theme **"Decade of Action: Taking SDGs from Global to Local"**, this review highlighted India's efforts in **localizing SDGs**, the role of state governments, and innovations during the COVID-19 response.

- **2023 VNR**: Emphasized India's **resilience and recovery** post-pandemic, digital governance, climate action, and integration of SDGs into economic recovery packages. It also included civil society perspectives and youth engagement models.

These VNRs demonstrate India's **transparency, global engagement, and commitment** to refining its policy and monitoring frameworks in line with international expectations.

Conclusion

India's institutional framework for implementing the SDGs is both comprehensive and evolving. With NITI Aayog at the helm, and growing involvement from state and local bodies, India has developed a decentralized and participatory model. However, the true test lies in **closing regional gaps, ensuring accountability, and improving coordination** between national and sub-national actors. Institutional reforms, sustained political will, and digital innovation will be key to strengthening India's path toward the 2030 Agenda.

V: Progress on Selected Sustainable Development Goals (2016–2025)

India's pursuit of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) has been a cornerstone of its national policy framework since the adoption of the United Nations Agenda 2030. This chapter provides an analytical overview of India's progress on six critical SDGs from 2016 to 2025, highlighting flagship initiatives, achievements, and ongoing challenges. It also evaluates regional disparities and policy lessons for scaling best practices.

INDIA PROGRESS ON SELECTED SDGs (2016-25)
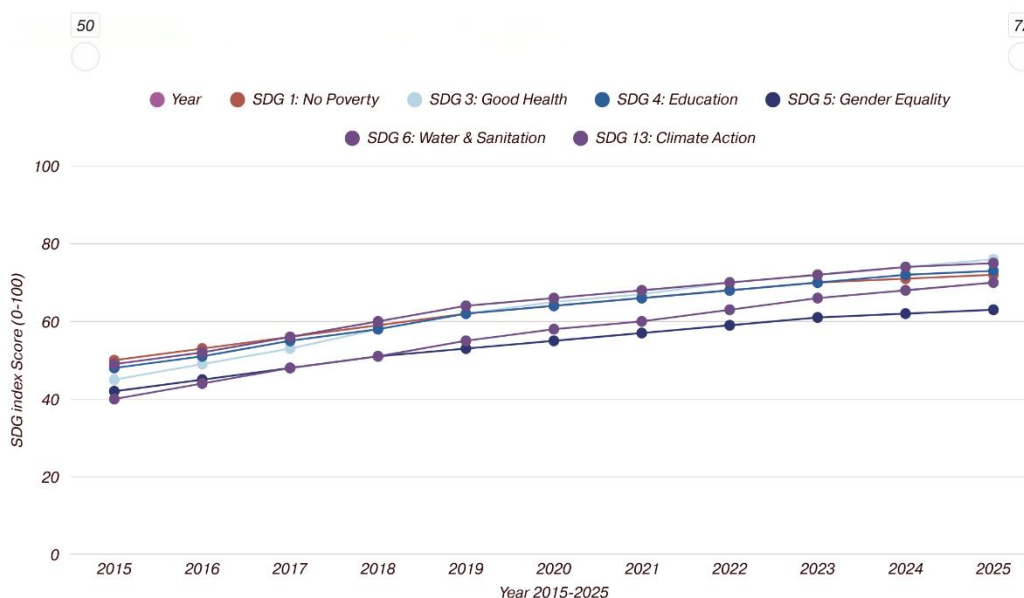
Interpretation
- *India shows a positive trajectory across all six SDGs, suggesting strong national policy alignment with the UN Agenda 2030.*
- *The pace of progress varies, with health and education showing accelerated growth, while gender and climate progress is slower but steady.*
- *The next phase (2025–2030) will require intensified efforts, especially in data systems, inter-departmental collaboration, and financing mechanisms.*

SDG 1: No Poverty

Government-Interventions
India's anti-poverty agenda has been driven by transformative programs such as the **Pradhan Mantri Garib Kalyan Yojana (PMGKY)** and **Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Act (MGNREGA)**. PMGKY was instrumental during the COVID-19 pandemic in extending direct cash transfers and food subsidies to marginalized communities. MGNREGA has provided wage-based employment to rural households, playing a vital role in social protection and asset creation.

Achievements
According to NITI Aayog (2023), India's multidimensional poverty has significantly decreased, from 24.8% in 2015–16 to 14.9% in 2019–21. This reduction is attributed to improvements in housing, sanitation, and asset ownership among rural populations.

Challenges
Despite significant gains, urban poverty remains a neglected dimension. Informal sector workers, migration-induced vulnerabilities, and lack of robust urban welfare frameworks contribute to urban-rural inequality.

SDG 3: Good Health and Well-being

Key-Initiatives
Flagship schemes like **Ayushman Bharat - Health and Wellness Centres (AB-HWCs)** and **Pradhan Mantri Jan Arogya Yojana (PMJAY)** have broadened access to affordable and quality healthcare. India has also ramped up its vaccination initiatives through **Mission Indradhanush**.

Successes
Between 2015 and 2021, India reduced its infant mortality rate from 41 to 28 per 1,000 live births (SRS, 2022). PMJAY has benefitted over 50 crore citizens with free secondary and tertiary healthcare access.

Gaps
India's public health expenditure remains under 2% of GDP, leading to overburdened systems, especially in rural and remote areas. Health workforce shortages and infrastructure gaps persist in tribal and underserved districts.

SDG 4: Quality Education

Policy-Framework
The **National Education Policy (NEP) 2020** and **Samagra Shiksha Abhiyan** form the backbone of India's educational reforms. These policies aim to ensure equitable and inclusive quality education from early childhood to higher education.

Impact-Indicators
India's Gross Enrolment Ratio (GER) in higher education rose to 27.3% in 2021–22 (AISHE, 2023). National literacy has increased to 77.7%.

Challenges
Digital inequality, inadequate school infrastructure, and high dropout rates among marginalized groups (especially girls and children with disabilities) remain key challenges, further exposed during the COVID-19 pandemic.

SDG 5: Gender Equality

Government-Interventions
Policies like **Beti Bachao Beti Padhao (BBBP)** and **Pradhan Mantri Ujjwala Yojana** target gender-based disparities by promoting girl child welfare and improving women's access to clean energy.

Progress-Made
Women now constitute 46% of elected representatives in Panchayati Raj Institutions. Female labor force participation has risen to 37% (PLFS, 2023), a marked improvement from previous years.

Persistent-Issues
Despite progress, a gender pay gap of 28% and socio-cultural constraints limit women's full participation in the economy and decision-making spheres. Issues of safety and digital literacy continue to affect empowerment outcomes.

SDG 6: Clean Water and Sanitation

Major-Schemes
The **Swachh Bharat Mission (SBM)** and **Jal Jeevan Mission (JJM)** have driven remarkable improvements in sanitation and drinking water infrastructure. Over 13 crore households have been connected to piped water as of 2024.

Success-Stories
India declared itself open defecation free (ODF) in rural areas in 2019. The percentage of rural households with access to safe drinking water has more than doubled since 2016.

Key-Concerns
Water stress due to over-extraction, groundwater depletion, and poor wastewater management threatens long-term sustainability. Urban slums remain underserved.

SDG 13: Climate Action

Strategic-Framework
India's climate strategy is anchored in the **National Action Plan on Climate Change (NAPCC)** and its various missions, including the **National Solar Mission**. India committed to achieving net-zero emissions by 2070 at COP26.

Achievements

Renewable energy capacity reached over 175 GW in 2024, with ambitious targets for 500 GW by 2030. India ranks among the top five countries in solar energy deployment.

Risks-and-Vulnerabilities

Extreme weather events, rising sea levels, and air pollution highlight the urgency of climate adaptation. Urban climate resilience plans remain fragmented.

VII: Regional Disparities in SDG Achievement

India's progress towards the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) is complex and multifaceted, characterized by significant inter-state variations. These disparities are rooted in diverse socio-economic realities, infrastructural gaps, and administrative capacities. While some states have emerged as front-runners due to robust institutional mechanisms and progressive policies, others continue to lag due to structural and systemic issues. Understanding these disparities is crucial for ensuring balanced development and inclusive growth across the nation.

A. High-Performing States

High-performing states have consistently scored well on the SDG India Index (2023–24), owing to a strong foundation in education, healthcare, inclusive governance, and effective implementation of centrally sponsored schemes. These states serve as models for the rest of the country.

State	SDG Index Score (2023–24)	Key Strengths
Kerala	85	High literacy rate (96.2%), universal healthcare access, strong decentralised governance, women's empowerment, and human development indices.
Himachal Pradesh	80	Significant improvements in sanitation (ODF+ status), women's education and employment, and community-led development initiatives.
Tamil Nadu	79	Effective urban governance, high industrialization, digital education reforms, and advanced public health infrastructure.

B. Lagging States

Lagging states face multidimensional challenges including poverty, poor infrastructure, low literacy, and weak institutional frameworks. These challenges hinder progress on multiple SDG fronts, especially those related to health, education, and gender equality.

State	SDG Index Score (2023–24)	Major Challenges
Bihar	58	Persistently high poverty levels, low school retention, poor sanitation, and governance deficits.
Uttar Pradesh	60	Inadequate health infrastructure, high maternal and infant mortality rates, and limited rural employment opportunities.
Jharkhand	61	Large tribal population with inadequate access to basic services, poor natural resource management, and marginalisation of indigenous communities.

C. Contributing Factors to Disparities

1. **Governance and Political Will**:

   - States like Kerala and Himachal Pradesh demonstrate strong political will, participatory governance, and decentralised decision-making through effective use of Panchayati Raj Institutions (PRIs).

   - In contrast, states like Bihar and UP exhibit top-down administrative approaches with limited stakeholder engagement.

2. **Socio-Economic Indicators**:

   - High-performing states show better outcomes in literacy (above 90%), maternal and child health, and access to digital technologies, which align directly with SDGs 3, 4, and 5.

   - Lagging states are constrained by high population density, caste-based inequalities, and underinvestment in social infrastructure.

3. **Fiscal Capacity and Resource Allocation**:

- States with higher per capita incomes and diversified economic bases (e.g., Tamil Nadu and Maharashtra) are better positioned to allocate funds towards education, health, and environmental sustainability.

- Revenue-poor states depend heavily on central transfers, which sometimes leads to delays and gaps in implementation.

4. **Infrastructure and Innovation**:

- Urban states lead in digital and transportation infrastructure, while rural-dominated states struggle with connectivity, electricity, and internet penetration.

D. Lessons and Best Practices

- **Kerala**:

  - Pioneered SDG localisation through empowered Local Self-Governments (LSGs).

  - Integration of health, education, and gender goals into district development plans.

- **Tamil Nadu**:

  - Innovated in urban water conservation through micro-irrigation systems and rainwater harvesting.

  - Leveraged IT-based monitoring systems for education and healthcare.

- **Himachal Pradesh**:

  - Promoted gender equality through SHGs and female literacy programs.

  - Achieved high sanitation coverage through behavioral change campaigns and strong community participation.

These examples underline that success in SDG implementation is not solely dependent on economic resources but also on governance models, community engagement, and prioritisation of sustainable development at all administrative levels.

Conclusion: Reducing regional disparities is crucial for achieving India's SDG targets by 2030. Targeted policy interventions, knowledge sharing between states, and stronger Centre-State coordination mechanisms can help bridge the gap and promote uniform progress across all regions.

VIII: Challenges in Achieving the SDGs in India

While India has demonstrated a strong commitment to the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), several cross-cutting challenges continue to hinder the pace and equity of implementation. These barriers are deeply rooted in the nation's socio-economic landscape, environmental vulnerabilities, institutional capacities, and data ecosystems. This chapter systematically analyzes the multidimensional constraints that obstruct India's SDG progress.

A. Economic Challenges: Resource and Funding Constraints

One of the most significant impediments to achieving the SDGs is the lack of adequate financial resources at both national and sub-national levels. Despite increasing allocations through schemes like the National Rural Health Mission and Samagra Shiksha Abhiyan, budgetary provisions often fall short of the scale required for transformative change.

- **Public expenditure on health and education remains below global averages**, with health spending around 2.1% of GDP as of 2023 (World Bank, 2024).

- Fiscal federalism challenges limit the ability of weaker states to mobilize resources, leading to uneven SDG progress.

- COVID-19 disrupted revenue flows, compelling governments to divert funds from long-term SDG goals to immediate relief measures.

B. Social Challenges: Inequalities and Marginalisation

Social stratification along caste, gender, religion, and economic lines creates deep-rooted disparities in access to basic services. These inequalities are often intergenerational and disproportionately affect women, Dalits, Adivasis, and minority communities.

- **SDG 5 (Gender Equality)** continues to face roadblocks due to low female labour force participation (23% in 2023), high gender pay gaps, and entrenched patriarchal norms.

- Caste-based discrimination and social exclusion hinder progress on **SDG 4 (Quality Education)** and **SDG 1 (No Poverty)**, especially among Scheduled Castes and Tribes.

- Regional conflicts and displacement (e.g., tribal insurgencies in Central India) obstruct

access to healthcare, education, and employment.

C. Environmental Challenges: Pollution and Climate Vulnerability

Environmental degradation presents a dual challenge — it not only hampers SDG 13 (Climate Action), but also affects health, livelihoods, and biodiversity.

- India is home to **14 of the 20 most polluted cities in the world (IQAir, 2024)**, impeding SDG 3 (Health) and SDG 11 (Sustainable Cities).

- Climate-induced disasters — floods, droughts, and heatwaves — are becoming more frequent, especially in vulnerable regions like the Sundarbans, Northeast, and coastal Maharashtra.

- Groundwater depletion, particularly in states like Punjab, Haryana, and Rajasthan, threatens SDG 6 (Clean Water and Sanitation).

D. Institutional Challenges: Policy Fragmentation and Governance Gaps

Despite frameworks for SDG implementation, policy coherence remains a major challenge. Lack of alignment between central and state government programs often leads to duplication, inefficiency, and weak monitoring.

- Many schemes operate in silos, failing to adopt a holistic or cross-sectoral approach to sustainability.

- **Limited capacity of Panchayati Raj Institutions (PRIs)** and Urban Local Bodies (ULBs) constrains SDG localisation at the grassroots level.

- Bureaucratic inertia and politicisation of development priorities delay the execution of reforms and weaken accountability.

E. Data and Monitoring Challenges: Gaps in Real-time Reporting

Robust and disaggregated data is crucial for tracking SDG progress. However, India faces significant challenges in data collection, standardisation, and real-time reporting.

- While NITI Aayog's SDG India Index offers an overall picture, **many indicators still rely on outdated or incomplete datasets**, especially at district and block levels.

- There is **inadequate integration of big data and real-time technologies** (e.g., GIS, AI) into planning and evaluation.

- Disaggregated data by gender, caste, disability, and region is insufficient for targeted interventions.

Challenge Area	Key Issues	Supporting-Data/ Examples
Economic	Low public spending; fiscal constraints; post-COVID disruptions	Public health spending at **2.1% of GDP** (World Bank, 2024); education spending at approximately **3.1% of GDP**
Social	Gender inequality; caste-based exclusion; regional disparities	Female Labour Force Participation Rate (LFPR) at **23% (2023)**; SC/ST literacy gaps; regional **HDI variation** (e.g., Kerala: 0.79 vs. Bihar: 0.52)
Environmental	Pollution; water scarcity; climate disasters	**14 of the 20** most polluted cities globally are in India (IQAir, 2024); **50%** of districts at risk of extreme weather events (MoEFCC Climate Risk Atlas, 2023)
Institutional	Policy fragmentation; weak local governance; implementation delays	Only **14%** of Urban Local Bodies (ULBs) meet good governance benchmarks; **60%** of Panchayati Raj Institutions (PRI) lack awareness of SDG localisation
Data & Monitoring	Lack of disaggregated data; outdated indicators; low tech integration	Around **40%** of SDG indicators lack district-level data; periodicity gaps in NSS, NFHS,

	and Oxfam inequality reporting

X: Conclusion

India, as the world's most populous democracy and a fast-growing economy, holds a critical role in the global pursuit of the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). The decade since the adoption of Agenda 2030 has been marked by a combination of policy ambition, grassroots innovation, and persistent development challenges. From 2016 to 2025, India has witnessed both visible progress and glaring gaps, reflective of its diverse socio-political and economic landscape.

Achievements and Strengths

Several milestones underline India's commitment to sustainable development:

- **Poverty Alleviation**: Flagship programs like Pradhan Mantri Garib Kalyan Yojana (PMGKY) and PM-KISAN have targeted vulnerable populations, contributing to a decline in extreme poverty, though multidimensional poverty persists.

- **Health Coverage Expansion**: Through Ayushman Bharat (PMJAY), over 500 million individuals have access to health insurance, enhancing affordability and financial protection.

- **Education and Literacy Gains**: The National Education Policy (NEP 2020) and Samagra Shiksha Abhiyan have improved enrolment, especially in marginalized communities.

- **Gender Empowerment**: Initiatives like Ujjwala Yojana and Beti Bachao Beti Padhao have advanced gender-focused development, particularly in rural India.

- **Sanitation and Water Access**: The Swachh Bharat Mission and Jal Jeevan Mission have revolutionized rural sanitation and piped water access, achieving remarkable behavioral change and infrastructural improvement.

- **Clean Energy and Climate Initiatives**: With 175 GW of renewable energy capacity installed by 2023, India has emerged as a global leader in solar and wind energy, aligning closely with SDG 13 (Climate Action).

Persistent and Emerging Challenges

Despite these achievements, the path to the SDGs is fraught with structural, systemic, and contextual challenges:

1. **Economic Constraints**: Public spending on health and education remains below global benchmarks. India invests just around 2.1% of GDP on health and 3.1% on education, limiting the scope and quality of social services.

2. **Inequality and Marginalisation**: Caste, gender, region, and income-based disparities continue to hinder inclusive growth. The female labor force participation rate remains below 25%, and tribal and rural populations suffer higher rates of deprivation in health and education.

3. **Regional Disparities**: States like Kerala, Tamil Nadu, and Himachal Pradesh lead in SDG progress, while Bihar, Uttar Pradesh, and Jharkhand struggle with governance deficits, fiscal stress, and socio-economic backwardness.

4. **Climate and Environmental Stress**: India is among the most climate-vulnerable countries globally. Air pollution, water scarcity, and climate-induced disasters are undermining health, agriculture, and livelihoods, particularly in urban slums and agrarian communities.

5. **Institutional and Governance Barriers**: There exists fragmentation between ministries, inadequate capacity in Urban Local Bodies (ULBs) and Panchayati Raj Institutions (PRIs), and limited alignment between State Action Plans and the national SDG framework.

6. **Data and Monitoring Gaps**: While tools like the SDG India Index have improved accountability, nearly 40% of SDG indicators lack disaggregated or real-time data, which hampers granular planning, implementation, and evaluation.

Strategic Way Forward

To realize the SDGs by 2030, India must move beyond incrementalism to systemic transformation. The future strategy must rest on the following pillars:

1. Deepening Decentralisation and Localisation

Local governments, especially **gram panchayats** and municipal bodies, must be empowered with finances, data tools, and capacity-building to translate SDG goals into actionable village-level or city-level interventions.

2. Strengthening Equity-Driven Policy Design

Interventions must address **intersectional inequalities**, ensuring targeted investments in women, tribal groups, Dalits, migrants, and the disabled. Universal access must go hand-in-hand with **differential targeting** based on vulnerabilities.

3. Enhancing Fiscal and Financial Innovation

Mobilizing private capital, CSR funding, green bonds, and climate finance is essential to bridge the development financing gap. **Public-private partnerships (PPPs)** in infrastructure, health tech, and education can accelerate innovation and reach.

4. Building Climate Resilience and Green Transitions

Climate adaptation needs to be embedded across sectors—agriculture, water, housing, and transport. India's **Green Hydrogen Mission**, **solar parks**, and **electric mobility** plans must be scaled alongside ecosystem restoration and circular economy models.

5. Leveraging Digital Governance and Real-Time Data

Digital public goods like **Aadhaar**, **DigiLocker**, and **CoWIN** offer a framework for scalable service delivery. A national **SDG Data Dashboard**, powered by AI/ML tools and citizen participation, could revolutionize data-driven governance.

6. Fostering Multi-Stakeholder Collaboration

SDG achievement is not a government-only agenda. Civil society, academia, private sector, media, and youth must co-create solutions. Platforms for **collaborative governance** and **social innovation labs** should be institutionalized.

The remaining years leading to 2030 will be critical. India stands at a juncture where policy ambition must be matched with execution excellence, and growth must be reoriented around **people**, **planet**, and **prosperity**. While the SDGs are a global mandate, for India, they are a national imperative to build a future that is **equitable**, **resilient**, and **sustainable**.

As **Gandhi** aptly said, *"The future depends on what you do today."* India must act decisively today to ensure no one is left behind tomorrow.

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