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India's Progress in Sustainable Development Goal

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Why in News: The Prime Minister, Narendra Modi, while addressing the first meeting of Finance Ministers and Central Bank Governors under India's G20 Presidency, held recently, expressed concern that "progress on Sustainable Development Goals (SDG) seems to be slowing down".

A brief about SDG Goals

The Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) are a set of 17 goals and 169 targets to help organize and streamline development actions for greater achievement of human well-being, while leaving no one behind – by 2030.

They pertain to social, economic and environmental sectors. They came into effect on January 1, 2016.

Assessment of India's performance in achievement of SDGs is a continuous process based on the National Indicator Framework (NIF), developed by the Ministry of Statistics and Programme Implementation (MoSPI) in consultation with NITI Aayog, line Ministries and various stakeholders.

MoSPI publishes progress report annually on National Indicator Framework for SDGs, based on the latest data supplied by the line Ministries/ Departments, which facilitates monitoring the progress of country on various SDGs.

Further, NITI Aayog releases the SDG India Index to measure the progress achieved by all States and Union Territories in their journey towards achieving the SDGs.

Major goals under SDG

Goal 1:

End poverty in all its forms everywhere

Goal 2:

End hunger, achieve food security and improved nutrition and promote sustainable agriculture

Goal 3:

Ensure healthy lives and promote well-being for all at all ages

Goal 4:

Ensure inclusive and equitable quality education and promote lifelong learning opportunities for all

Goal 5:

Achieve gender equality and empower all women and girls

Goal 6:

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Ensure availability and sustainable management of water and sanitation for all

Goal 7:

Ensure access to affordable, reliable, sustainable and modern energy for all

Goal 8:

Promote sustained, inclusive and sustainable economic growth, full and productive employment and decent work for all

Goal 9:

Build resilient infrastructure, promote inclusive and sustainable industrialization and foster innovation

Goal 10:

Reduce inequality within and among countries

Goal 11:

Make cities and human settlements inclusive, safe, resilient and sustainable

Goal 12:

Ensure sustainable consumption and production patterns

Goal 13:

Take urgent action to combat climate change and its impacts

Goal 14:

Conserve and sustainably use the oceans, seas and marine resources for sustainable development

Goal 15:

Protect, restore and promote sustainable use of terrestrial ecosystems, sustainably manage forests, combat desertification, and halt and reverse land degradation and halt biodiversity loss

Goal 16:

Promote peaceful and inclusive societies for sustainable development, provide access to justice for all and build effective, accountable and inclusive institutions at all levels

Goal 17:

Strengthen the means of implementation and revitalize the global partnership for sustainable development

Analysis of Performance

A recent study assesses India's progress on 33 welfare indicators, covering nine SDGs and providing a mixed picture of positive and concerning trends.

India is 'On-Target' to meeting 14 of the 33 SDGs, including indicators for neonatal and under-five mortality, full vaccination, improved sanitation, and electricity access, all of which have substantially improved in the last five

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years.

However, the national 'On-Target' designation does not apply equally across all districts.

While neonatal and under-five mortality are currently both 'On-Target' for the country, 286 and 208 districts (out of 707 districts), respectively, are not.

Similarly, significant progress on access to improved sanitation excludes 129 districts that are not on course to meet this SDG indicator.

Indicators such as eliminating adolescent pregnancy, reducing multidimensional poverty, and women having bank accounts have improved across a vast majority of the districts between the years 2016 and 2021.

Of concern, for 19 of the 33 SDG indicators, the current pace of improvement is not enough to meet SDG targets.

Despite a national policy push for clean fuel for cooking, more than two-thirds (479) of districts remain 'Off-Target'. Similarly, some 415 and 278 districts are 'Off-Target' for improved water and hand washing facilities, respectively.

Of heightened concern are SDG indicators for women's well-being and gender inequality. No district in India has yet succeeded in eliminating the practice of girl child marriage before the legal age of 18 years.

At the current pace, more than three-fourths (539) of districts will not be able to reduce the prevalence of girl child marriage to the SDG target of 0.5% by 2030.

Unsurprisingly, other critical and related indicators such as teenage pregnancy (15-19 years) and partner violence (physical and sexual) that may be tracked back to child marriage are issues that India needs to escalate as priorities.

Despite the overall expansion of mobile phone access in India (93% of households), only 56% women report owning a mobile phone, with 567 districts remaining 'Off-Target'.

Lessons from the COVID-19 approach

Designing and implementing a policy response to a pressing issue is best viewed as an "optimisation problem" relying on political will, responsive administration, adequate resources, and sound data.

India adopted an "optimisation" approach to the COVID-19 pandemic and thus, it was given the focus and resources necessary to succeed.

There are lessons from this strategy that can inform and optimise India's approach to its SDG targets.

First, strong and sustained political leadership supported by a responsive administrative structure at all levels, from national to the district level, was critical to the success both of India's COVID-19 vaccination programme and its efficient rollout of a comprehensive relief package. This rare, nimble political-administrative synergy was willing to learn and undertake course corrections in real-time.

Creating a similar mission-oriented ethos that is assessment-oriented and which provides adequate support for accomplishing India's district-level SDGs is now urgently needed

Second, India's success with COVID-19 was largely possible both because of the existing digital infrastructure, as well as new, indigenous initiatives such as the Co-WIN data platform, and the Aarogya Setu application.

Following these examples, India must put in place a coordinated, public data platform for population health management, by consolidating its many siloed platforms into an integrated digital resource for district

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administrators, as well as State and national policy makers.

Finally, a targeted SDG strategy delivered at scale must be executed with the same timeliness of India's COVID-19 relief package. As early as March 2020, the Government of India had put in place the ₹1.70 lakh crore Pradhan Mantri Garib Kalyan Yojana, later augmented to nearly ₹6.29 lakh crore, which included the Pradhan Mantri Garib Kalyan Anna Yojana (₹3.91 lakh crore until December 2022) covering 800 million people.

Key to this relief programme was a mix of spending to provide direct in-kind and economic support, as well as measures aimed at revitalising the economy, small businesses, and agriculture.

This was critical in blunting the adverse effects of COVID-19, especially for vulnerable and the socio-economically disadvantaged groups. It also measurably demonstrated the value of a proactive, government-supported programme specifically aimed at improving people's well-being.

The Way Ahead

India needs to innovate a new policy path in order to meet the aspirations of its people in the decade ahead — there is no historical precedence for a democratic and economically open nation on how to deliver development to a billion-plus people in a manner that is healthy and sustainable. In successfully delivering a real-time response to the COVID-19 pandemic, India has proved that it is possible to deliver at scale in such an ambitious and comprehensive manner. To succeed in meeting its SDG targets, especially those related to population health and well-being, basic quality infrastructure, and gender equality, a similar concerted, pioneering, nation-wide effort would be the need of the hour.