

# THE POLITICS OF SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT GOALS

**Ms. Fiona Dias**

Assistant Professor (CES)  
Faculty of Law

MSU Campus, Sayaji Path, Sardar Nagar, Pratapgunj, Vadodara, Gujarat 390002

## **Abstract**

*In September 2000, the United Nations Millennium Declaration was adopted by the members of the United Nations. These members gathered together in a global partnership to organize one of the most successful anti-poverty programmes in the world. It established an eight-time bound target which were aimed specifically to eradicate poverty within the period of fifteen years. In 2015, the Millennium Development Plans highlighted that poverty was not the only issue which states had to deal with. Poverty was the axis of the greater wheel of underdevelopment. Recognizing the various issues would deal to the effective reduction in poverty through global effort and commitment. Poverty is a problem which most countries in the world experience and is a direct result of unequal distribution of income and wealth. The United Nations aimed to identify the causes of global poverty and worked towards formulating a framework through which poverty could be reduced using both domestic and international resources. The Millennium Development Goals were successful as majority states feel obligated to apply the policies successfully and show a positive result.*

## **INTRODUCTION**

The successful functioning of Millennium Development Goals led to the creation of a broader framework of Sustainable Development Goals (SDG). The eight Millennium Development Goals have been distributed into seventeen SDG's with 100 indicators which has resulted in creating a more comprehensive agenda for assessing development among various nations of the world. (United Nations)(Lempert, 2017) It also indicates that the international community has become more accepting of international organizations like United Nations to play an important role in domestic policies with regard to development. States have realised that the changing nature of development goals and the immense need for a substantive policy framework to achieve them is only possible by utilizing resources and information which United Nations is able to provide. (Abbott & Snidal, 2005) The proposed Sustainable Development Goals are a result of decades of conferences within the United Nations and information provided by transnational actors. It is also a commitment to governance which is transparent, accountable and legitimate at international, national and sub national levels. (Karns & Mingst, 2005) While this is no easy feat there has been a resounding pledge to achieving these goals before 2030. India too has pledged its commitment to Sustainable Development Goals mainly because, most of our domestic development goals are reflected within the Sustainable Development Goals. The task of applying the Sustainable Development Goals over the next fifteen years in India has fallen in the lap of the newly established and yet untested NITI Aayog, an institution which replaced the Planning Commission in the hope of ushering in newer development and planning strategies.

This paper seeks to substantially contribute to the growing discourse on the SDG's in India by identifying the shortcomings and giving relevant recommendations for the same.

## **NITI AAYOG AND SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT GOALS**

India's commitment to the idea of welfare and development has been reflected in the Indian Constitution multiple times. The ideals of liberty, equality, fraternity, and justice reflect in the Preamble of the Constitution of India and are echoed through the Part III, Fundamental Rights and Part IV, Directive Principles of State Policy of the Constitution. India has a very clear and well structure idea of development which coordinates with the decentralized democratic system.

Keeping this in mind, the NITI Ayog established a framework for the fulfilment of the SDG based on this framework the SDG India Index, Baseline 2018 was created. This report checked 13 out of 17 goals given by the United Nations. It assessed 62 priority indicators, measuring the progress made through government interventions in states and union territories. To summarize, "The SDG India Index is intended to provide a holistic view on the social, economic and environmental status of the country and its States and UTs." (NITI Aayog, 2018)

The report segregated various union territories and states into 4 different criteria's by computing a composite score. If a state or union territory obtained a 100-point score then it was termed as an achiever. If they scored more than or equal to 65 but less than 100 then they were termed as front runner. If they obtained scores more

than or equal to 50 but less than 65 then they were termed as performed. Any state which scored less than 50 was termed as aspirant. In 2018, Kerela and Himachal Pradesh were considered as front runners which the highest score of 69 points while there were three states which performed so poorly that they were termed as aspirants. These states were Assam, Bishar and Uttar Pradesh which 49, 48 and 42 points respectively. (NITI Aayog, 2018), In 2021, all three states Assam, Bihar and Uttar Pradesh have progressed to the Performer category with 57,52 and 60 points respectively(NITI Aayog, 2020)(NITI Aayog, 2021). By comparing goal wise data ranking of all these three states, it can be observed that these states are struggling to achieve goals 1 (No poverty), goal 2( zero hunger), goal 9 (industry, innovation and partnership), goal 10 (reduced inequality) and goal 13 (climate action).

The improvement in score indicates that these states who were initially lacking behind are gradually getting better at achieving the priority indicators. All three states have their nodal agencies set up are providing for various state level schemes to achieve the priority. Despite this, both Bihar and Uttar Pradesh are yet to bring out a proper budget for the effective executive of SDG framework.(NITI Aayog, 2020)

The individual analysis of very goal in these three states who are struggling to achieve the goals has highlighted certain challenges which intensify regional disparity. Let us investigate them.

### CHALLENGES IN APPLYING SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT GOALS

The NITI Ayog has given a clear outline to fulfil the Sustainable Development Goals till 2023. The states and union territories have also lent their support. The fact that in 2018 there were three states who fell in the aspirant category and in 2021 there are none. This indicates that all states and union territories have been successful in applying the frameworks for applying SDGs. Yet all states and union territories are not at the same level. As seen above, all states are developing at a different rate which on its own is not worrisome. But if we view the discrepancy between the states in the levels of development, the problem becomes clear. India suffers from uneven development, which becomes even more apparent when applying the sustainable development goals. while observing goal number 3, 4 and 5 this skewness indicates the presence uneven human development. Citizens are not getting equal access to basic amenities like, healthcare, education and equality. In the long run this unevenness in development can act as a major deterrent in achieving SDG's. It will also morph into serious political and economic issues.

The major problem in securing similar levels of development is how dissimilar individual states are from each other. All states are working on achieving similar set of goals, but all states do not have the same resources. All states have different rates of economic growth. Some states are economically better than others and can invest resources specifically to achieve these goals. Some states have recorded such high level of poverty that they are dependent on the central government aids to deliver basic amenities to the public. Fulfilling SDG would be a monumental task in those states where the per capital income is less than average.

The second problem lies in the policy formulation and application of the same which more than often becomes a victim of political and administrative abuse. The SDG is a resource intensive development project. It is also a long-term commitment and most political parties cannot boast about SDG as a party achievement. This causes political discouragement in applying the SDG framework as required. Administrative sections put SDGs on the backbench to focus on political conducive goals. the lack of awareness at the political and administrative levels about the importance of achieving SDGs is visible especially at the local level. Long term development goals are often sacrificed for short term infrastructural goals which drain the already limited resources available at a local level.

The third challenge is the lack of inclusivity in innovations and techniques at a local level. For Goal 1(No poverty),Goal 2(zero hunger), Goal 3 (good health and well being), Goal 4 (quality education) and Goal 5 (gender equality) to be fulfilled successfully participation of all stake holders at a local and regional level. While broad national level plans can provide a framework which states can follow, there is a need to include local NGO's, political parties, community leaders and administration to create an issue centric policy which generated effective results.

The fourth challenge is that even after 3 years of the baseline report published by NITI Ayog, some states are still not prepared with their vision and agenda for achieving sustainable development goals. For example, Bihar which still is not well organized in visualizing a framework. In other case, the of Gujarat has their agenda prepared but only two districts in the entire state are having individual plans to apply the SDG causing regional disparity with the state. As all states and union territories are not prepared with their plans, it is safe to assume that these states are yet to define the institutions which will be taking care of the goals. According to the 2020-21 report, all states have identified institutions whose major function is to check the application of the SDG plans, but most states have not created specialized agencies which focuses only on the fulfilment of SDG goals.(NITI Aayog, 2021) This acts as a major roadblock as the lack of specialized institutions and personals means that department and personal are overburdened with additional responsibility. These personal maynot even be trained to fulfil the constant demand of SDGs.

Achieving development goals also requires huge funding and constant checks and balances. As there is a dearth in proper institutions and trained individuals, the level of accountability should be low. As we are aware, the

SDG's function at a micro level which makes constant checks and balances a herculean task. The policy framers are dependent of data which is delivered from district and states administration without verifying if the data is accurate or not (NITI Aayog, 2018). In three years, there has been substantial shift among the states, where many states have shifted from aspirant to performer levels as we have observed with Assam. But to see this growth in three years can raise some questions about the policies which existed before SDG. We must also keep in mind, that the achievement of SDG is considered as an award to a particular state or district. Regions are competing to achieve basic standards of development which should be equal in the first place. (NITI Aayog, 2021) For example, goal 2 which is zero hunger. Policy makers at the national and state level need to question whether sustainable development is a competition? it would be easier to achieve the SDG goals of there was regional cooperation rather than competition. This will also help in gaining more authentic data.

The final challenge which I would like to highlight for this paper is the limited foreign and international aid. The SDG are resource intensive, and it is impossible for a country like India to achieve them without adequate foreign aid. In the past few years, foreign aid in India has fallen drastically as many transnational NGO's have taken back their aid. While there are many political reasons and motives behind this the absence of these funds have made the development of poor regions in India a formidable challenge. Limited foreign aid also means that we are not gaining the benefit for innovations which are happening at an international level. SDGs are applied across the world and therefore it is important to include the innovation and plans which have been successful in other regions of the world.

## RECOMMENDATIONS

There are many real challenges which the country is facing in terms of achieving the sustainable development goals. To overcome it there are some recommendations which can be given.

Firstly, data accuracy should become a priority for all government institutions. Data accuracy and authenticity plays an important role in applying policies effectively. State and nodal agencies should have trained members who can collect and analyse data efficiently. (NITI Aayog, 2020)

Secondly, there is a need for specialized institutions and trained personnel at all levels. Administrative personnel cannot be overworked with additional duties along with their regular portfolios. People who are trained and can work at a grassroots level are essential to the attainment of this goal.

Thirdly, public participation and public sensitization is imperative to achieve goals. Having the support of public and local agencies play a very important role in achieving these goals. (Mahadevia, 2002) Goal Number 5, gender equality is a goal which is posing as a great challenge in almost all states and union territories because of its complex nature. There is a need for more capacity building programmes and sensitizations about achieving these goals. We need to raise funds and innovate new techniques at grassroots levels. Nodal offices need to invite new research and techniques from local citizens as they will be more realistic and cost efficient.

And lastly, competitive federalism needs to be replaced with cooperative federalism, so that drastic regional disparity can be avoided. All states and union territories are mutually dependent and need to develop by sharing resources. Regional differences and mindless competition need to be replaced with regional coordination and cooperation for the SDF to be successful.

## CONCLUSION

India is one of the few countries in the world who have a proper policy framework in place along with central and state level institutions to implement this policy in a proper manner. We should keep in mind, that policies which are cosmetic in nature and are aimed at bringing temporary change can end up creating newer levels of inequalities. These goals and the policies need to be assessed regularly and need to be modified when necessary. These comprehensive goals should be capable on bringing sustainable change which is effective and can survive the complicated political, economic, and social systems. As time is short and goals are many, any delay will be costly and once again the need for serious application of the goals must be emphasized upon.

## REFERENCES

- Abbott, K. W., & Snidal, D. (2005). Why States Act Through Formal International Organizations. In P. F. Diehl, *The Politics of Global Governance: International Organizations in an Interdependent World* (pp. 9-43). New Delhi: Viva Books Private Ltd.
- Karns, M. P., & Mingst, K. A. (2005). *International Organizations: The Policy and Process of Global Governance*. New Delhi: Viva Books Private Ltd.
- Lempert, D. (2017). Testing the Global Community's Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) Against Professional Standards and International Law. *Consilience*, 111-175.

Mahadevia, D. (2002). Sustaining Urban Development in India: An Inclusive Perspective. In D. Westendorff, & D. Eade, *Development and Cities: Essays from Development and Practice* (pp. 136-159). Boulder, CO: Lynne Rienner.

NITI Aayog. (2018). *SDG INDIA INDEX*. New Delhi: NITI Aayog.

NITI Aayog. (2020). *SDG India: Index and Dashboard 2019-20*. New Delhi: NITI Aayog.

NITI Aayog. (2021). *SDG India: Dashboard and Index 2020-2021*. New Delhi: NITI Aayog.

Transforming our world: the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development. United Nations, 2015. Web. 30 October 2018. < <https://sustainabledevelopment.un.org/post2015/transformingourworld> >