

Sustainable Development -Turning Challenges into Opportunities to Achieve The Sustainable Development Goals.

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Abstract

Sustainable development goals (SDGs) have set the 2030 agenda to transform our world by tackling multiple challenges humankind is facing to ensure well-being, economic prosperity, and environmental protection. In contrast to conventional development agendas focusing on a restricted set of dimensions, the SDGs provide a holistic and multidimensional view on development. The Covid-19 Pandemic is a big disappointment for a large number of these targets that had a deadline of 2030. This is mainly because of their inter linkages with other global targets that require urgent action. Needless to say, the timeline and methods for these targets need to be radically redesigned. We are going to discuss how the challenges arising due to Covid -19 can be turned into opportunities to achieve the sustainable Goals.

Key words: Sustainable development goals, stake holders, resilience, adaptability

1.0 Introduction:

The war against Covid-19 has opened a battlefield elsewhere. The unprecedented lockdown has unsettled lives, halted the economy and pushed India Inc deeper into crisis even as pain on the employment front looks inevitable. These difficulties are only dwarfed by the hardships and devastation faced by millions of migrant workers and daily-wage labourers, with little economic buffer or welfare safety net.

It is against this complex and mammoth problem that we need to critically think and see India's performance in the bruising battle underway. In this paper, we are going to discuss the impact of Covid-19 on the achievement of sustainable development goals and how India can use the current disruption caused due to COVID-19 as an opportunity to accelerate the inevitable and urgently-required regenerative economy, and create a new development template focusing on sustainable development Goals.

2.0 Current scenario and challenges :

According to the International Labour Organization, COVID-19 could render 25 million people unemployed and many more underemployed by virtue of reduced wages and working hours. This is especially critical in India where a large part of the population is either self-employed or dependent on daily wages for their subsistence.

The global economic slowdown, caused due to COVID-19 is creating a challenging test for humanity.

How will a country of 1.3 billion people with a high density of population, millions of habitants in rural villages and urban slums cope with such huge economic slow down.

A large part of the services sector in the developing world remains unorganized and does not feature in the digital space – neither it will be easy to place them there as almost all of it requires physical presence. This inability of being accommodated in digital spaces will lead to more poverty, hunger, and inequalities thereby hampering achievements of SDGs 1, 2, and 10 (No poverty, Zero hunger and Reduced inequalities). These are the challenges to the equity dimension of holistic development that is being posed by the pandemic severely affecting SDG3 (good health and well-being).

On the other hand, reduced economic activity in the physical space of the planet will be good for the natural environment: SDG13 (climate action), SDG 14 (life below water) and SDG 15 (life on land) may get augmented. However, sustainable development is not devoid of humans: it talks of the coexistence of biodiversity conservation, and development of the human society by meeting with the various equity needs. Here one of the most crucial goals gets affected: SDG 16, which talks of peace, justice and strong institutions.

Large parts of the developing and underdeveloped world view this pandemic as one imported by the privileged class through international travels and free mixing in the occidental ways of life. The ambitions of underdeveloped world will get a huge beating for almost no fault of theirs, and a probable demand for reparation (compensation by those responsible) cannot be stated to be “unjustified”! The bigger question is: can the global justice system uphold such demand? Else, all we get is a neo-Malthusian creed where conflict, hatred, insulation and distrust prevail and distributive justice is not served.

Tackling these unprecedented challenges require a systems approach and the mobilization of all stakeholders to respond. As we fight this pandemic together, governments, businesses, civil society and citizens require great resilience and adaptability. With an approach that includes the whole society, together we can and will fight this coronavirus pandemic and overcome the challenges caused due to COVID -19.

3.0 Sustainable Development Goals:

The United Nations Sustainable Development Goals (UN SDGs) of 2015 are a set of 17 consolidated targets that form a comprehensive framework for holistic global development. It brings together the five pillars:

People (Goals 1-6)

Planet (Goals 12, 13, 14, 15),

Prosperity (Goals 7-11)

Peace (Goal 16) and

Partnerships (Goal 17).

India is striving hard to achieve these goals by the Alignment of National Development Agenda with SDGs: At the macro level, India's key developmental programmes, policy focus and resource allocation align with the SDGs. For instance, Ayushman Bharat (Pradhan

Mantri Jan Arogya Yojana), which covers 500 million persons and is the largest health protection scheme in the world closely aligns with SDG 3 (health and well-being) and SDG 10 (reduced inequalities). India's comprehensive climate action agenda and leadership in International Solar Alliance aim to achieve the same outcomes which SDG 7 (clean and affordable energy) envisions. India's Aspirational Districts Programme, which intends to bring holistic development to 112 relatively backward districts of the country thereby contributing to regional equality aligns with the spirit of SDG 10 (reduced inequalities).

To coordinate all the SDG efforts at the national and sub-national levels, NITI Aayog acts as the nodal institution. At the same time, owing to the federal structure of the country, the States/ Union Territories play a significant role in ensuring the success of the SDG agenda. It monitors and measures the progress achieved and distance to be covered by the States/UTs in their journey towards meeting the targets, using the SDG India Index. The SDG Index is a powerful tool which offers excellent possibilities for the States/UTs to identify priority areas which demand action, facilitate peer learning, highlight data gaps, and promote healthy competition.

The Government of India has taken all the key steps to promote the localization of the SDGs in the country by mandating NITI Aayog and Ministry of Statistics and Programme Implementation (MoSPI) to play a coordinating role on planning and statistics respectively, with the central ministries and the state governments.

After all the efforts that the government has been putting in this regard, India has ranked a low 115 out of 162 nations assessed on where they stand with regard to achieving the Sustainable Development Goals, according to a new index which is topped by Denmark and shows all countries face major challenges in achieving these ambitious goals.

The index collected available data for 162 countries to assess where each country stands in 2019 with regard to achieving the SDGs.

It ranks countries based on their performance across the 17 global goals, a set of ambitious objectives across the three dimensions of sustainable development - economic development, social inclusion and environmental sustainability, underpinned by good governance. The index helps countries identify priorities for early actions and shows that every country faces major challenges in achieving the SDG's.

"The Sustainable Development Goals are stretch goals, but they are within reach if countries work towards them with clarity and determination.

Almost all the SDG's will be detrimentally affected in more ways than one, cutting across issues of the economy, society and the environment.

As the whole world is preparing for a global economic crisis, reflecting on the SDG's becomes all the more important.

This is mainly because the SDGs enshrine the main forms of capital for the long-term economic health of a country –

- Human capital (poverty, hunger, health, education, water and sanitation);
- Social capital (gender, equality, peace and justice, global partnerships);
- Physical capital (economic growth, industry, sustainable cities) and
- Natural capital (terrestrial biodiversity, oceans, climate, clean energy, responsible consumption and production).

These factors are imperative for operationalizing businesses, attracting foreign investments and, most important, increasing the efficiency of domestic economic processes.

As India prepares to revive its economy in the aftermath of the pandemic, two critical questions must be answered to help determine its development future. Should India continue with the same development model and lock in years of inefficient, high-carbon and unsustainable development? Or should India use the current disruption as an opportunity to accelerate the inevitable and urgently-required shift to a low-carbon, resilient, regenerative economy, and create a new development template for the world to adopt?

4.0 Road to Sustainable and Resilient Recovery post COVID-19:

As India takes steps toward economic recovery after Covid-19, there's room to also take action for long-term sustainable development and improved resilience.

As the novel corona virus, Covid-19, rapidly spreads across the world, health services in many nations are increasingly overwhelmed, while the global economy is falling into an unprecedented recession. The International Monetary Fund has cut India's growth forecast for 2020-21 to 1.9%, down from its earlier estimate of 5.8% in January this year. Informal sector workers and members of lower income groups have been hit particularly hard as their wages disappear. The International Labour Organization estimates that 400 million people in India are at risk of sinking deeper into poverty.

The pandemic has reinforced the links between health, environment and the economy. There is evidence that air pollution has contributed to higher Covid-19 mortality rates. While deforestation has increased our exposure to pathogens carried by wildlife, melting ice due to climate change can release undiscovered viruses frozen in the permafrost.

But this crisis also demonstrates that governments and individuals are capable of strong and rapid action in the face of an overarching challenge.

As India looks to shore up its economy, it is worth reflecting on the other systemic actions that are needed to shift towards a more sustainable and resilient economy. Here are five interrelated recommendations.

1. Invest in sustainable infrastructure

India too should take this opportunity to increase support for renewable energy, particularly rooftop solar, through appropriate policies and business models. Decentralized solar power can help spread critical services in remote regions if the upfront capital constraints can be addressed. It should revisit the potential import duties on solar panels, since this may not increase domestic production, but may raise the cost of solar power.

As a promising market of the global solar industry, India should leverage **its Make in India programme** and seize this opportunity to create an alternative destination for solar cell, module and inverter manufacturing. Increasing no-carbon, reliable, uninterrupted and sufficient energy production should be core to the preparation for a more sustainable economic recovery.

Similarly, scaling up the electrification and adoption of public transport will be critically important to reduce traffic congestion and air pollution. This should involve closer coordination with the electricity sector and a greater focus on vehicle charging infrastructure. Continued investment in cold storage facilities and supply chains will ensure the preservation and timely delivery of agricultural produce and reduce losses to farmers.

2. Build the resilience for the most vulnerable

About 90% of India's workforce is informally employed, which includes gig economy workers. This population is extremely vulnerable to economic shocks and needs greater access to formal credit and social safety nets such as insurance and pension schemes.

Beyond employment guarantees, a universal basic income – broader than current schemes that are conditional upon occupation and land ownership – can help provide vital resources for subsistence, or for investing in education and health. Greater access to bank accounts for the 20% of adults without one, per 2017 data, would help efficiently deliver this income to households.

Lastly, it is critically important to expand access to clean water, clean air and primary health care. These will improve life expectancy and increase economic and physical resilience.

3. Use fiscal mechanisms for recovery and resilience

Fiscal mechanisms can help support recovery and resilience efforts, while promoting low-carbon development. The Indian government has announced an economic stimulus of INR 1.7 trillion (\$24 billion), and is exploring another bailout of INR 750 billion for Micro, Small and Medium Enterprises (MSME), among other steps. Though MSMEs need immediate financing to deal with their wage bills, the government can also infuse capital for them to undertake needed industrial energy efficiency upgrades.

Government plans to aggressively push for Make In India programme by offering domestic and foreign manufacturers policy and fiscal incentives to manufacture locally.

Given the situation and India's huge population, healthtech and medical devices startups are perhaps the only chance India has to boost this capacity in the short term. Hence, incentives to support manufacturing locally is bound to help the country fill gaps.

Several sectors, like the aviation and auto industries, will need support in order to recover. This will require consideration of the fiscal situation, and it presents an opportunity to encourage greater sustainability by making this support conditional on cleaner technologies and fuel efficiency.

Meanwhile, the government can increase taxes on luxury sectors with high environmental impacts. It can also use this opportunity to rationalize fertilizer subsidy and increase taxes on fossil fuels, with the savings and proceeds returning to target populations through cash transfers or social safety nets.

4. Encourage long-term change in behavior

The current crisis has changed patterns of consumption. Electricity usage patterns have shifted as people are working from home on more flexible schedules. Non-essential

purchases have temporarily ceased. All these offer an opportunity for implementing demand-side solutions to drive long-term behavior changes for more sustainable development.

For instance, encouraging conservation in energy – through nudges and tariff reforms – can drive down consumption. Promoting reuse, recycling and repair models for consumption can contribute to a circular economy and reduce the waste generated by current business models. Supporting the continuation of work-from-home policies can drive down road traffic congestion and air pollution.

While encouraging the continuation of these new trends, the government should also foster new behaviors. For example, with nearly 80% of the population expected to be in the middle-income bracket by 2030, it is extremely important to attract them to public transport options. The government could achieve this through expanding connectivity to business districts, improving and streamlining the network and discouraging the use of cars through measures such as road congestion pricing, paid street parking and higher taxes on luxury vehicles.

5. Regulate enabling technologies

Finally, it is useful to consider that the future may see greater employment in the gig economy and e-commerce sectors, as well as in new technologies that can help support future response and resilience mechanisms. While supporting the development of such sectors, it is important to put the right regulations in place to ensure data privacy and consumer protection.

The decisions taken today can provide immediate relief, but also secure a lasting economic recovery, increase community resilience and ensure a long-term pathway to sustainable development.

We should not allow today's crisis to compromise our efforts to tackle other inescapable challenges that face our world. Impetus plans and incentives are being put up by the Governments to encounter the fiscal damage from the coronavirus.

Already as far as the service sector is concerned, a large part of it has been moving to the digital world thereby creating virtual workspaces replacing the physical workstations. Moreover, the world is already witnessing a heavy reliance on digital connectivity. Hence, there remains the possibility that growth may be spurred from this digital space mostly from services, but this will also witness simultaneous slump and closures of traditional manufacturing. This is the apparent impact.

5.0 Conclusion:

In order to fulfill the dream of making the 21st century India's development, the way forward is through ensuring that the country becomes self-reliant. Self-reliance which is the buzz word now has undergone a change in the globalized world and clarified that when the country talks about self-reliance, it is different from being self-centered.

Self-reliant India will stand on five pillars (i) Economy, which brings in quantum jump and not incremental change (ii) Infrastructure, which should become the identity of India (iii) System, based on 21st century technology driven arrangements (iv) Vibrant Demography, which is our source of energy for a self-reliant India (v) Demand, whereby the strength of our demand and supply chain should be utilized to full capacity.

The call given by the government to go from local to global by strengthening the MSME (Micro Small and Medium Enterprise) sector, wealth creation and poverty to

prosperity by considering the crisis as an opportunity will definitely help us in attaining sustainable development.

While readjusting to the changing world orders after this pandemic, it is of utmost importance for our nation to strive towards the SDG's with a renewed vigor, capitalizing on the fact that this huge challenge in the present is an immense learning opportunity for the entire human race in the future.

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