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Short Communication

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How Far Is India from Achieving the Sustainable Development Goals by 2030? Progress, Challenges, and the Road Ahead

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India's commitment to the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development is one of the world's major development projects, with far-reaching repercussions because the country is home to approximately one-sixth of the world's population. Since adopting the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) in 2015, India has launched a number of flagship initiatives aimed at reducing poverty, strengthening health systems, improving sanitation, expanding renewable energy, and encouraging inclusive economic growth [1]. These efforts have resulted in measurable gains across multiple SDG metrics. According to the SDG India Index 2023-24, India's composite SDG score increased from 66 in 2020-21 to 71 in 2023-24, indicating progress across multiple development dimensions. However, significant interstate disparities persist, with states such as Kerala, Uttarakhand, Tamil Nadu, Himachal Pradesh, and Chandigarh outperforming several central and eastern states [2].

India has made significant headway in poverty reduction during the past decade. The National Multidimensional Poverty Index indicated that roughly 248 million people exited multidimensional poverty between 2013-14 and 2022-23, with the national multidimensional poverty rate falling from 29.2% to 11.3% [3]. Similarly, access to basic services has improved significantly. Households with improved sanitation climbed from 48.5% in NFHS-4 (2015-16) to more than 70% in NFHS-6 (2023-24), while households with improved drinking water now approach 95%, owing primarily to the Swachh Bharat Mission and Jal Jeevan Mission [4-6]. These improvements have helped to reduce open defecation, diarrheal illnesses, and environmental contamination, but issues remain in terms of water quality, wastewater management, and sanitation infrastructure sustainability.

The health sector has made significant advances, particularly in maternal and child health. The maternal mortality ratio fell from 130 per 100,000 live births in 2014-16 to 93 in 2019-21, approaching the SDG target of fewer than 70 deaths per 100,000 live births [5]. Institutional deliveries have surpassed 90%, and more than 75% of pregnant women receive four or more antenatal care visits, indicating improvements in reproductive health services [3]. Under-five mortality has fallen from 49 deaths per 1,000 live births in 2013 to around 31 per 1,000 live births in 2023, while infant and neonatal mortality have also decreased significantly [6]. Childhood immunization has increased significantly, with full immunization coverage rising from 62% in NFHS-4 to more over 80% in NFHS-6, thanks to Mission Indradhanush and strengthened routine immunization initiatives [3]. Despite these gains, India continues to have one of the world's highest burdens of tuberculosis, diabetes, hypertension, and cardiovascular disease, while public health spending remains at around 2.1% of GDP, significantly lower than in many upper-middle-income countries [7-8].

Nutritional results show both progress and persisting problems. Child stunting dropped from 38.4% in NFHS-4 to around 32% in NFHS-6, and underweight frequency also decreased. However, wasting continues to exceed the global nutrition target, and anemia affects over two-thirds of children aged 6-59 months and more than half of women of reproductive age, indicating ongoing micronutrient shortages and dietary inadequacies [3]. The cohabitation of undernutrition and fast rising overweight and obesity represents a growing double burden of malnutrition, endangering future health and economic productivity.

India has also emerged as the world leader in renewable energy. By 2025, the country will have installed over 220 GW of non-fossil fuel electricity capacity, making it one of the fastest major economies to transition to renewable energy [9.10]. Nonetheless, climate change and environmental degradation pose serious dangers. India's air pollution remains severe, with

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several cities consistently ranking among the world's highest annual particulate matter concentrations. Air pollution alone causes over 1.5 million premature deaths each year; while rising temperatures, floods, cyclones, and water scarcity pose new threats to health, agriculture, and livelihoods [11]. In recent years, India's GDP growth has exceeded 6% annually, making it one of the world's fastest-growing major economies [12]. However, this expansion has not always resulted in inclusive development. Female labor force participation remains lower than the worldwide average, youth unemployment persists, and significant disparities exist across states, districts, and population groups. Furthermore, while India has achieved or is on track to meet targets for sanitation, electricity access, digital inclusion, and renewable energy, progress toward Zero Hunger (SDG 2), Good Health and Well-being (SDG 3), Gender Equality (SDG 5), Decent Work (SDG 8), Reduced Inequalities (SDG 10), Climate Action (SDG 13), and Sustainable Cities (SDG 11) is insufficient to meet the 2030 targets on current paths.1,13 These mixed results suggest that, while India has laid a solid foundation for sustainable development, accelerating progress in the coming years will necessitate increased investment in human capital, stronger governance, climate resilience, and equitable implementation across all states.

Although India has made significant progress toward several SDGs, the current rate of implementation shows that meeting all 17 goals by 2030 will be extremely difficult. According to the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals Report 2025, only a small proportion of SDG targets are on track globally, with progress slowed by climate change, economic uncertainty, conflicts, rising debt, and the long-term effects of the COVID-19 pandemic. India exemplifies a global pattern in which fast increases in infrastructure and service coverage coexist with persistent gaps in health, nutrition, employment, environmental sustainability, and social justice.

Despite a significant reduction in multidimensional poverty, approximately 15% of India's population remained below the national multidimensional poverty criterion in 2019-21, demonstrating that millions continue to face simultaneous deprivation in education, health, and living standards. Furthermore, despite a major increase in social protection coverage from 22% in 2016 to 64.3% in 2025, a sizable share of informal laborers, migratory communities, and urban poor remain vulnerable to health emergencies and economic shocks.

The most pressing issues remain SDG 2 (Zero Hunger) and SDG 3 (Good Health and Well-Being). Despite increases in food supply and welfare programs, India still has one of the highest global burdens of child malnutrition. Child stunting, wasting, low birth weight, and anaemia are still major public health concerns, particularly in low-income communities. Simultaneously, the country is experiencing an epidemiological transition marked by fast increasing noncommunicable diseases, which account for more than two-thirds of total mortality. Diabetes, hypertension, cardiovascular disease, cancer, chronic respiratory disease, and mental illness are all on the rise, as are persistent communicable diseases including tuberculosis and vector-borne infections. This combined load puts immense strain on an already resource-constrained health-care system, jeopardizing productivity, household income, and long-term economic development.

Gender equality is still a work in progress. While female labor force participation has improved, with the female-to-male labor force participation ratio rising from 0.43 in 2020-21 to 0.54 in 2023-24, women continue to face lower workforce participation, wage disparities, underrepresentation in leadership positions, and a disproportionate burden of unpaid care work. Gender-based violence, child marriage, and unequal access to economic opportunities all impede progress toward SDG 5. Addressing these structural inequities necessitates not just legislative changes, but also investments in education, financial inclusion, childcare facilities, and women's economic empowerment.

Another significant difficulty is ensuring environmental sustainability. Despite India's status as a global leader in renewable energy expansion and climate diplomacy, rapid urbanization, industrialization, and population growth continue to exacerbate environmental degradation. Air pollution is one of the primary risk factors for premature death, while groundwater depletion, biodiversity loss, and the growing frequency of heatwaves, floods, cyclones, and droughts endanger agricultural productivity, food security, water availability, and human health. Climate change has a direct impact on numerous SDGs, including health, hunger, water, sustainable cities, and economic growth. Stronger climate adaptation plans included into national agricultural, urban development, and health policies are necessary to achieve SDG 13.

National SDG performance is still compromised by regional disparities. Progress in India varies greatly between states and union territories due to the country's federal structure. While several economically weaker states still have high rates of maternal mortality, child malnutrition, inadequate health infrastructure, lower educational attainment, and few job opportunities, high-performing states have made significant progress in health, education, sanitation, and governance. These inequalities demonstrate that national averages frequently conceal significant subnational differences. Therefore, district-level planning, focused investments in aspirational areas, increased decentralization, and performance-based resource allocation will be necessary to accelerate SDG development. There are significant prospects for evidence-based planning and monitoring at the national and subnational levels thanks to the recent creation of the India SDG Dashboard and the reinforcement of the National Indicator Framework.

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