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ANALYSIS OF INDIA'S SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT GOALS: PROGRESS, CHALLENGES, AND STRATEGIC PATHWAYS

~ *Mahek Thacker*

1. ABSTRACT

India's progress toward the 17 UN Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) shows notable improvements in social and infrastructure areas, but it faces significant regional differences and conflicts with environmental goals. National indicators reveal gains in poverty reduction, sanitation, access to education, and clean energy. However, these improvements are uneven; top-performing states like Kerala far exceed lagging states such as Bihar. Key challenges include increasing social and gender inequality, environmental degradation, and gaps in institutions. For instance, India's current development strategy does not adequately tackle deep-rooted problems like malnutrition and gender inequality. Environmental SDGs are lagging due to rapid industrial growth and weak environmental protections. Our analysis combines empirical data from sources like the SDG India Index and MoSPI indicators with recent research to outline India's SDG achievements. We observe that centralized monitoring tools, such as NITI Aayog's Index, have encouraged competition among states, but criticisms point to data gaps and a lack of focused targeting. Sectoral studies highlight important trade-offs; for instance, expanding agriculture to ensure food security (SDG2) can lead to biodiversity loss (SDG15) unless countered with intensification and technology. Corporate social responsibility (CSR) efforts mainly focus on social SDGs but need to broaden their scope to include environmental goals. Education reforms under NEP 2020 are in line with SDG4, but their implementation needs more attention. We conclude that advancing SDG progress in India requires stronger local capabilities, intersectoral cooperation, and targeted investment in underperforming areas. Specifically, enhancing data systems, empowering women (SDG5), and funding environmental innovations are urgent priorities. These conclusions should help

policymakers refine strategies and promote inclusive, data-driven governance as India moves toward 2030.

KEYWORDS: Sustainable Development Goals, SDG India Index, Regional Disparities, Environmental Sustainability, Corporate Social Responsibility, Policy Implementation.

2. INTRODUCTION

In 2015, the United Nations introduced Agenda 2030, consisting of 17 Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) to tackle urgent global issues such as poverty, inequality, and climate change. India, home to nearly 18% of the world's population and facing substantial development needs, adopted this framework and integrated the SDGs into its national planning. NITI Aayog, the national policy think tank, oversees this effort by producing the annual SDG India Index to track progress across all states and Union Territories. Nationally, India's composite SDG score improved from 57 out of 100 in 2018 to 71 out of 100 in 2023–24, reflecting advancements in areas like No Poverty (SDG1), Climate Action (SDG13), and Energy (SDG7). Despite this, the country still grapples with significant gaps, as many health, nutrition, and environmental targets are not being met.

Academic research sheds light on India's unique SDG landscape. The NITI Aayog index and Voluntary National Reviews (VNRs) track official progress, but researchers point out limitations in these evaluations, such as a focus on flagship schemes and a narrow range of indicators. Empirical studies show that national averages disguise substantial disparities at the state level; Kerala and Goa lead, while Bihar and Jharkhand lag significantly behind. Sectoral research indicates mixed results: India has broadened education and sanitation access, yet issues with quality and equity remain. Furthermore, the tension between rapid economic growth and environmental preservation creates complex policy challenges.

This paper consolidates these findings into a detailed review of India's SDG progress. We begin by summarizing overall achievements and regional discrepancies (Section 2). Section 3 explores institutional frameworks and the role of corporations in implementing SDGs. Section 4 examines the trade-offs between economic growth and environmental sustainability, along with challenges in various sectors such as agriculture, water, and gender. In Section 5, we outline strategic implications and propose reforms. Our methodology combines a review of official data (SDG Index, NIF reports) with recent scholarly literature to present a well-rounded view.

3. LITERATURE REVIEW

3.1 NATIONAL AND STATE-LEVEL PROGRESS

The official SDG India Index shows steady overall improvement: scores increased from 57 in 2018 to 66 in 2020–21 and reached 71 in 2023–24. The highest national scores are in Climate Action, Energy, and No Poverty, driven by initiatives like expanding renewable energy and social safety nets. For example, Goal 13 (Climate Action) saw its score rise from 54 to 67 between 2018 and 2023–24. Government initiatives, such as building over 11 crore toilets and providing 14.9 crore rural tap-water connections, have sped up progress on SDG targets related to Clean Water, Sanitation, and Good Health.

However, analysts warn that national gains are not evenly distributed. Dwivedi and Sharma (2025) applied an information-based MCDA (SWI) model to the SDG Index, revealing stark contrasts: Kerala has the top rank (information score around 4.52 bits), while Bihar is at the bottom (around 5.53 bits). Tripathi et al. (2025) found that only 50% to 57% of SDG targets are on track nationally, with major deficits in areas like poverty, education, health, and housing. Subramanian et al. (2023) identified that India is falling short on 19 out of 33 key indicators at the district level, particularly in child nutrition, maternal health, and women's empowerment. These studies stress that aggregate progress primarily comes from high-performing states, while many lagging regions such as Madhya Pradesh, Bihar, Jharkhand, and Odisha remain far behind in meeting basic SDGs.

Key scholarly reviews identify patterns showing that southern states generally perform better than central and eastern states in social and economic SDGs. Garai et al. (2024) found that southern states have higher SDG scores and are narrowing inequalities. National policies, like NITI's Aspirational Districts program, focus on underperforming areas with coordinated investment. Nevertheless, governance issues, including federal-state coordination and limited devolution, continue to impede consistent progress.

3.2 SECTORAL AND CROSS-CUTTING THEMES

3.2.1 HEALTH AND NUTRITION (SDGS 2,3)

India has made strides in basic healthcare access and poverty reduction, yet it still struggles with quality and nutrition. High rates of anemia, child wasting, and vaccination gaps indicate complex health challenges. For example, Roy and Pramanick (2019) reveal that per-capita water and sanitation resources are declining, despite some slow improvements in sanitation

coverage. Rising GDP has contributed to better sanitation and fewer waterborne diseases. The COVID-19 pandemic temporarily reduced pollution levels and highlighted the links between the environment and public health, showing that better air quality during lockdowns was associated with lower morbidity levels. However, the pandemic also exposed weaknesses in healthcare infrastructure.

3.2.2 EDUCATION (SDG4)

Education quality has improved through reforms, particularly under the National Education Policy (NEP) 2020. Analyses stress that NEP's emphasis on inclusive foundational learning and curricular updates aligns closely with SDG 4 goals. The integration of digital tools and teacher training under NEP has also helped achieve SDGs. Still, education quality varies widely; student outcomes and female literacy lag in many states, and the pandemic disrupted schooling for many students.

3.2.3 GENDER EQUALITY (SDG5)

Gender equality remains a significant issue. Although there has been policy attention on female labor participation and political representation, India continues to face substantial gender disparities. Studies at the regional level report high rates of child marriage, gender-based violence, and limited opportunities for women in education and employment. Experts call for gender-responsive budgeting and more community involvement to ensure that SDG targets related to women's rights and empowerment lead to real change. Women's organizations advocate for better data collection and accountability to help drive action on SDG 5.

3.2.4 ENVIRONMENTAL SUSTAINABILITY (SDGS 6,7,13–15)

Scholars emphasize India's challenge in balancing economic growth with environmental protection. Studies show that rapid urbanization, industrial growth, and population pressures have increased pollution, deforestation, and resource strain. For instance, Boora and Karakunnel (2024) highlight that industrial and infrastructure development often conflicts with climate goals, indicating the need for integrated planning to reduce these trade-offs.

In water and sanitation (SDG 6), Roy and Pramanick find that India's per-capita water resources are declining, threatening future water security. They also note that improvements in sanitation, linked to income growth, significantly lower waterborne diseases. The connections between SDG6, SDG3 (health), and SDG1 (poverty) are strong: access to clean water alleviates healthcare burdens and poverty traps.

In energy (SDG 7) and climate (SDG 13), India has made impressive strides. Renewable capacity has skyrocketed, with solar installations increasing by 200% to 300% in some categories. National initiatives like Ujjwala (clean cooking) and the International Solar Alliance reflect an environmental agenda. However, meeting future targets, such as achieving 500 GW of renewables by 2030, will require ongoing research and development, as well as upgrades to the power grid.

Trade-offs between SDGs are especially evident in agriculture and land use. Hinz et al. (2020) employed scenario modeling to demonstrate that objectives for food security (SDG 2) through expanded agricultural practices can harm biodiversity and carbon stocks (SDGs 15 and 13). Their research indicates that while intensification can boost crop yields and overall carbon sequestration, it also leads to biodiversity loss unless managed through careful land-use policies. This analysis shows that pursuing SDGs must consider these interactions.

3.2.5 CORPORATE SECTOR AND CSR

The private sector is becoming an important ally in achieving SDGs. Studies of Indian companies reveal that larger firms are increasingly aligning CSR projects with social SDGs such as health, education, and poverty. Panda et al. (2024) show that CSR spending patterns generally align with SDG priorities, although environmental SDGs receive less corporate attention. They argue that CSR initiatives should extend beyond the local community and explicitly address environmental sustainability, such as engaging in renewable energy projects and pollution control. A “nexus” approach is encouraged: companies should map out how economic, social, and environmental outcomes connect to maximize benefits and avoid “SDG-washing.” Regulatory pressures, like India’s CSR law, and rising stakeholder expectations are gradually motivating more companies to commit to ESG (environment, social, governance) principles.

3.3 GOVERNANCE AND IMPLEMENTATION CHALLENGES

India’s SDG framework focuses more on means than strict obligations, which raises common concerns for developing countries. The literature points out institutional fragmentation; overlapping responsibilities between the central and state governments can hinder progress. Data and monitoring gaps are another recurring issue. The local indicator framework under gram panchayat schemes shows that many SDG targets are complicated multi-part statements, which limits local understanding and support (Biju et al., 2026). While countries like Nigeria

face data quality issues, India also struggles with incomplete subnational statistics for many targets, making detailed planning difficult.

Funding challenges are significant. Unlike developed countries, India cannot easily raise new revenue for SDGs. Experts emphasize the need to mobilize domestic and concessional finance to address a trillions-of-dollars gap by 2030. At the same time, audits by the Comptroller and Auditor General identified unaligned roadmaps, unclear financing frameworks, and low public awareness as barriers to SDG programs.

Equity concerns also influence SDG discussions. Khalid et al. (2020) noted that SDGs could become “one-size-fits-all” solutions that might not tackle India’s most pressing issues, such as agrarian distress and urban poverty. Our review of key literature confirms that experts often prioritize essential SDGs—poverty, hunger, health, education, gender, and clean water—as immediate concerns for India. They highlight that success in achieving SDGs in other places does not guarantee local outcomes.

4. METHODOLOGY

This study takes a mixed-methods approach. Quantitatively, we analyze secondary data from NITI Aayog’s SDG India Index (2018–2023 editions) and MoSPI’s National Indicator Framework, covering over 113 indicators related to the SDGs. We look at national averages and state/UT rankings to identify trends by goal. Qualitatively, we review relevant government reports, policy documents, and academic studies (via Google Scholar and policy portals) to provide context for the numerical progress. Key sources include NITI Aayog press releases and India’s Voluntary National Reviews, along with peer-reviewed articles on SDG progress, governance, corporate social responsibility, and technology innovations. Citations from these sources are integrated throughout to support our assessments. Following SDG literature, we focus on goal trade-offs, institutional frameworks, and local versus national performance. While we do not conduct an original survey or modeling, our approach combines official data with academic insights to understand challenges and opportunities for India’s SDG agenda. We consolidated findings from multiple studies to identify consistent patterns in progress, disparity, and policy responses.

5. DISCUSSION

5.1 AGGREGATE PROGRESS WITH UNEVEN DISTRIBUTION

India's national trajectory shows real gains on many SDGs, but these improvements are uneven. For instance, the NITI Aayog Index indicates that Goals 1, 8, 13, and 15 have reached the "front-runner" category. These reflect widespread achievements: poverty rates fell significantly, access to primary education and financial services increased, sanitation coverage reached new highs, and renewable energy targets were achieved ahead of schedule. Related flagship schemes—Ayushman Bharat (health insurance), Jal Jeevan Mission (tap water), Ujjwala (clean cooking)—directly advance SDGs 3, 6, and 7 and have been effective for hundreds of millions. These coordinated efforts demonstrate how centralized programs can scale effectively.

However, researchers note that many of these "successes" conceal incomplete change on the ground. For example, despite the sanitation campaign building over 11 crore toilets, open-defecation-free status remains fragile in some districts, as behavior and maintenance lag. Similarly, while electrification initiatives have expanded grid connections, reliable access and clean cooking beyond LPG adoption are still problems. Health outcomes, such as infant mortality and maternal health, have improved but not uniformly.

Looking at state-level data is informative. Dwivedi & Sharma's (2025) SWI analysis ranks states quantitatively. Kerala ranks highest due to its strong social development and governance, excelling in health, education, and environmental performance. In contrast, Bihar, Jharkhand, and Uttar Pradesh are at the bottom. The gaps in performance, often 20 to 30 points on an index scale, reflect not just rural-urban divides but also differences in fiscal capacities, institutional quality, and baseline conditions. Subnational analyses consistently recommend tailoring approaches to local needs, urging states to adjust central schemes to their realities and invest in key areas like primary healthcare and basic education. The need for collaborative federalism is emphasized; NITI Aayog's monitoring aims to motivate "competitive cooperative federalism," but it requires deeper state empowerment in practice.

5.2 SUBNATIONAL DISPARITIES AND BOTTLENECKS

5.2.1 STATE AND DISTRICT GAPS

India's SDG progress varies greatly across regions. In the 2023–24 SDG India Index, Kerala and Uttarakhand lead with scores around 79, followed by Tamil Nadu (78) and Goa (77). In contrast, Bihar (57), Jharkhand (62), and Nagaland (63) lag behind. These discrepancies highlight long-standing development gaps. Eastern and central states, such as Bihar, Madhya Pradesh, Odisha, and Chhattisgarh, consistently underperform due to poverty, illiteracy, and

weak infrastructure. This pattern continues at the district level; Subramanian et al. find that most “Off-Target” districts for health and nutrition indicators are in Madhya Pradesh, Chhattisgarh, Jharkhand, Bihar, and Odisha. Conversely, many districts in Kerala, Tamil Nadu, Punjab, and Goa are on track. Urban-rural disparities also appear in some states, with metropolitan regions often outperforming rural ones. Figure 2 illustrates this north-south divide. These inequalities suggest that national averages, such as an overall SDG score of 71, hide areas of significant underperformance; some poorer states still have composite scores around 55 to 60.

TABLE 1. Regional SDG performance trends (aggregated). Higher scores indicate better SDG outcomes.

REGION	EXAMPLE STATES	SDG INDEX SCORE (2023–24)	MAIN SDG GAPS	IMPLICATIONS
Southern States	Kerala, Tamil Nadu, Andhra	77–79 (Kerala top)	Strong in health, education	Sustain gains via innovation, tech; focus on aging and environment
Northern States	Punjab, Haryana	~70–75	Good in infrastructure, housing	Further improve equity, employment
Central/Eastern	Bihar, MP, Jharkhand	55–65 (lowest scores)	Poverty, education, health, nutrition	Requires major institutional strengthening, social investments
Western States	Gujarat, Maharashtra	65–75	Varied; Gujarat high on water, others on industry	Address pockets of urban deprivation
UTs & Special Areas	Jammu & Kashmir, Chandigarh	~75 (highest UT scores)	—	Model best practices for states

SOURCE: NITI Aayog SDG India Index 2023–24. Interpretation by authors.

5.2.2 BOTTLENECKS AND SYSTEMIC ISSUES

The literature identifies common barriers. Limited changes in the economy, including a heavy reliance on low-productivity agriculture and informal services, restrict job-rich growth and poverty reduction. Gaps in public service delivery, such as uneven quality in education and health access, undermine human-capital SDGs despite broader coverage. Institutional fragmentation between federal and state agencies often leads to coordination failures. Weaker states struggle with resource and capacity issues; for instance, fiscal deficits in many central states limit social spending. Data and monitoring gaps persist; while the SDG Index includes many indicators, others, especially for SDGs 12 to 14, remain under-measured, complicating evidence-based planning. Lastly, challenges like gender norms, with low female labor participation at about 25%, and entrenched inequalities related to caste and geography hinder inclusive progress. In summary, analysts warn that without specific reforms, stronger subnational institutions, decentralized planning, and data-driven policymaking, India may struggle to maintain its current momentum and address existing gaps.

5.3 ROLE OF THE PRIVATE SECTOR AND INNOVATION

5.3.1 CORPORATE SOCIAL RESPONSIBILITY (CSR)

India's mandatory CSR requirement (Companies Act 2013) has directed corporate funds toward social goals that can help achieve SDGs. Recent studies show that Indian companies are increasingly aligning their CSR spending with SDG themes. Panda et al. (2024) note broad alignment, with firms supporting poverty, education, and health. However, they argue that CSR efforts should also focus on environmental SDG goals. The disclosures of the top 100 firms (FY 2016–17) reveal large investments in SDG-related areas, though there are gaps in climate, biodiversity, and community-level efforts. Importantly, CSR initiatives often concentrate locally; scaling these efforts for greater impact requires strategic partnerships. Other research indicates that effective CSR aligned with SDGs can enhance corporate financial performance, particularly when linked with MSME supply chains. For instance, Gupta (2025) finds a positive correlation between CSR and SDG alignment with profits, suggesting that sustainable practices benefit both society and business. Policy experts recommend using CSR to fund scalable SDG solutions—such as channeling CSR spending to renewable energy, sanitation infrastructure, or girls' education. However, as Panda et al. point out, CSR must change from mere compliance (“CSR as charity”) to embedding SDG priorities in corporate strategy and execution.

5.4 OTHER PRIVATE SECTOR AND PUBLIC–PRIVATE INITIATIVES

In addition to CSR, private-sector innovation is essential. Public-private partnerships (PPPs) have played a significant role in developing India's SDG infrastructure. Telecom and IT companies have supported Digital India (SDG 9/10), while banks and fintech have advanced financial inclusion (SDG 1/10). The National Education Policy 2020 encourages universities to become "living labs" for sustainability, integrating SDGs into their curricula and operations. Technology startups are also making contributions; for example, Indian cleantech firms are deploying affordable solar and biomass solutions (SDG 7), and health-tech companies are expanding telemedicine and diagnostics (SDG 3). The banking sector's priority-sector lending mandates and microfinance institutions, such as MFIs and SHGs, have helped reduce poverty and women's vulnerability (SDGs 1 and 5). Yet, experts point out that private investment in SDG sectors remains insufficient. Corporate strategies must increasingly adopt "impact investing" and social entrepreneurship models to address financing gaps.

5.5 ARTIFICIAL INTELLIGENCE AND SDGS

Artificial intelligence (AI) provides new tools to boost SDG progress. Bibliometric analyses show that AI applications are rapidly increasing in India's key SDG areas. For instance, deep learning models are used in health (SDG 3) for disease diagnosis and drug discovery, and in agriculture (SDG 2/13) for yield prediction and pest control. India's national AI strategy explicitly targets SDGs; the government's IndiaAI mission has approved around 30 AI solutions for healthcare, agriculture, climate, and governance by mid-2025. Initiatives like the Bhashini platform, launched in 2023, provide AI-driven translation in 20 languages to promote digital inclusion and education (SDG 4/10). The recently launched BharatGen AI, a government-supported language model for 22 Indian languages, is aimed at improving service delivery and citizen engagement. Research on the impact of AI on sustainable development goals (SDGs) shows that India is a key player. An article from IndiaAI reports that India ranks among the top contributors to AI-for-SDGs research worldwide. Policymakers are pushing to integrate AI into public systems. Pilot projects are using machine learning for pandemic preparedness (SDG 3), flood forecasting (SDG 13), and smart city management (SDG 11). Overall, AI's role in India's SDGs is twofold: it can optimize resource use and policy planning, and foster innovation (SDG 9). However, analysts warn that AI also brings risks, such as job displacement, surveillance, and bias, which need management through "Safe and Trusted AI" frameworks. Ensuring ethical, data-driven AI is crucial for achieving India's 2030 goals without increasing inequalities.

6. KEY CHALLENGES AND TRADE-OFFS

Our review highlights three main challenges affecting several goals:

- **ECONOMIC TRANSFORMATION:** India's slow shift from low-productivity agriculture to high-productivity industry and services poses a risk to SDG sustainability. Without enough quality jobs, poverty reduction may stall. Experts note that this is a constraint for SDGs: GDP growth alone cannot guarantee inclusive development. If growth focuses on heavy industry or resource extraction without green safeguards, environmental SDGs will suffer. Boora and Karakunnel point out this issue: sectors driving GDP, like mining and infrastructure, often harm air, water, and forests. A balanced approach is necessary, promoting "green growth" sectors, such as clean technology and services, while enforcing environmental standards alongside economic plans.
- **SERVICE DELIVERY GAPS:** Although coverage has improved, quality and equity still lag. Urban-rural and socio-economic disparities remain in healthcare (SDG 3) and education (SDG 4). Reports indicate that even public schools and clinics face issues like absenteeism, malnutrition among schoolchildren, and teacher shortages. Nutrition security (SDG 2) is especially complex: India produces enough food, yet child stunting and anemia are widespread. This "food-nutrition paradox" means that solutions based solely on supply (like grain stocks and subsidies) must also consider diet diversity, women's health, and sanitation. Analysts advocate for integrated social policies, connecting programs like MNREGA (workfare), midday meals, and health outreach to combat poverty.
- **INSTITUTIONAL COORDINATION AND DATA:** Implementing SDGs in India faces challenges due to fragmented governance. Studies show that plans often remain centralized, leaving local bodies, like panchayats and municipalities, with weak roles. The new Local Indicator Framework (LIF) seeks to involve local governance, but its complexity and lack of capacity result in poor target localization. Kak (2026) found that local actors often struggle to understand multi-variable SDG targets. Furthermore, monitoring systems have gaps in data; certain SDG indicators lack annual and detailed data at the district level, which impairs timely policy adjustments. Researchers recommend enhancing data ecosystems through GIS mapping and real-time dashboards to make SDG tracking effective. The recent National Indicator Framework report

(MoSPI, 2025) also highlights the need to address indicator gaps, particularly in environmental and social outcomes.

The articles by Phillips (2025) and Albakjaji (2025) note that international SDG commitments are goals, not legally binding obligations, so successful implementation relies on political will and public pressure. Critics warn that focusing too much on state rankings can lead to quick fixes, like building a set number of toilets, instead of meaningful reforms.

7. STRATEGIES AND POLICY DIRECTIONS

The literature and data analysis suggest several priority strategies:

1. **TARGET LAGGING GOALS AND REGIONS:** Policies should focus on underperforming sectors, such as health, nutrition, education quality, and environmental resilience, as well as areas in need. Specific interventions in states like Bihar, Jharkhand, Uttar Pradesh, Madhya Pradesh, and Odisha are crucial. The SDG India Index has already highlighted such gaps. Additionally, the Aspirational Block approach could help align social schemes with SDG outcomes by scaling down from districts.
2. **DECENTRALIZATION AND LOCAL OWNERSHIP:** Empower local governments to take charge of SDGs. This involves transferring funds, defining roles within the Panchayati Raj system, and training officials on SDG linkages. The LIF should be simplified into actionable targets (Biju et al., 2026). Multi-stakeholder forums comprising government, NGOs, and the private sector can promote local initiatives, as seen in some successful village projects.
3. **ENHANCE DATA AND MONITORING:** Invest in stronger SDG monitoring systems beyond the Index. Having real-time data through public dashboards, remote sensing for environmental metrics, and expanded District Health Surveys will allow for timely corrections. Civil society, including media and academia, should audit progress to supplement official reports.
4. **INTEGRATED POLICY DESIGN:** Take a "nexus" approach in policymaking to manage trade-offs. For instance, agricultural policy should balance food security with environmental needs, and land-use planning should designate zones for agroforestry and wildlife corridors alongside cultivation. Environmental clearances should include assessments of SDG impacts.

5. **PRIVATE SECTOR ENGAGEMENT:** The CSR agenda is evolving into a broader ESG movement in India. The government can encourage corporate contributions to underperforming SDGs, such as nutrition and clean water, through matching grants or recognition programs linked to SDGs. Enhancing firms' capacity to integrate SDGs will help turn goodwill into real impact.
6. **GENDER AND SOCIAL INCLUSION:** There needs to be a special focus on SDG 5. This includes enforcing laws for safety and property rights, providing social protection for women, and incorporating gender considerations into all SDG programs. Likewise, addressing caste and urban-rural divides under SDG 10 (Reduced Inequalities) is vital for overall progress.
7. **GREEN FINANCE AND INNOVATION:** Advance research and development (SDG 9) by raising India's R&D/GDP ratio (about 0.7% in 2023) to match global standards. Public-private funding mechanisms, such as blended finance and green bonds, can support SDG projects, including renewable energy and sustainable cities. India's role in climate finance, particularly through the International Solar Alliance, should be complemented by domestic policies like carbon pricing or biodiversity funds to protect SDGs 13-15.
8. **STRENGTHEN ACCOUNTABILITY:** The fourth Voluntary National Review (2027) should address outcome gaps. Including SDG metrics in state budgets and audits by institutions like the CAG can build accountability. Public awareness campaigns through media and curriculum on SDGs can foster grassroots demand that aligns with the UN's principle of leaving no one behind.

By adopting these strategies, India can progress toward the 2030 Agenda. However, many studies warn that without systemic change, some goals may remain unattainable. Tripathi et al. (2025) conclude that India needs ongoing reform and investment to reach its targets on time.

8. CONCLUSION

India's SDG journey shows a mix of strong policy mobilization and significant achievements in some areas, but persistent deficits in others. Our analysis reveals that while the country has created a solid foundation, including monitoring systems and national plans, structural inequities and environmental pressures still challenge the SDG vision. Key gaps continue to

exist in health, education quality, gender equity, and sustainability. Additionally, the COVID-19 pandemic and ongoing global uncertainties highlight the fragility of progress.

To address the remaining gaps, policy must become more focused, decentralized, and integrated. The diversity among states and cities should not be overlooked; they need autonomy and resources to pursue localized SDGs. At the same time, central oversight through Indexes and the National Indicator Framework must evolve to encourage long-term system building rather than short-term results. Improving data transparency and stakeholder participation will be essential.

India's role as a global actor means that its SDG performance impacts others, particularly in areas like climate leadership and technology transfer. Continuous international cooperation—through climate finance, development assistance, and knowledge sharing—can strengthen India's capabilities.

In summary, India has demonstrated its ability to progress on many SDGs, but the remaining challenges are the toughest: reaching the last mile. Research indicates that success will require innovative governance, collaboration across sectors, and sustained commitment. If India can leverage its demographic advantage, entrepreneurial spirit, and increasingly aware citizenry toward sustainability, it can not only meet its 2030 commitments but also serve as a model for other developing nations facing similar hurdles.

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