



An analysis of sustainable development Goals in India

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Abstract

The 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development established an ambitious, universal framework of 17 Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). As a large, diverse and rapidly transforming country, India's progress on the SDGs carries global significance. This paper presents a comprehensive analysis of India's SDG trajectory by synthesising national monitoring instruments (notably the SDG India Index and national SDG indicator frameworks), India's Voluntary National Review, and international assessments. We examine national- and state-level trends over the past half-decade, evaluate goal-wise performance, explore sub-national heterogeneity, assess financing and institutional arrangements, and identify data and measurement constraints. The evidence indicates a clear upward trend in composite SDG performance driven by gains in poverty reduction, energy access and renewables, and several social indicators. However, substantial challenges persist: inter-state and intra-state disparities remain wide, environmental goals (water quality, biodiversity, land degradation) lag behind, gender equality and certain inclusion metrics show limited movement, and financing and data gaps constrain implementation. We recommend a policy package combining strengthened localisation, outcome-linked financing, scaled blended and green finance, robust environmental governance with science-based monitoring, and a national push to close data gaps with interoperable administrative and geospatial systems. These measures are tailored to support India in converting recent momentum into durable, equitable SDG outcomes by 2030.

Keywords: Sustainable development goals, india, SDG india index, localisation, SDG monitoring, environmental governance, financing

Introduction

The 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development (2015) committed all UN Member States to a universal set of 17 SDGs and 169 targets to end poverty, protect the planet and ensure prosperity for all. For India — a country of more than 1.4 billion people with vast regional diversity — achieving the SDGs is both an enormous challenge and an opportunity. India's successes (or shortfalls) will materially affect global progress on many targets. India has responded by institutionalising SDG monitoring and localization through multiple instruments: a national SDG coordination architecture, state- and district-level benchmarking (notably the SDG India Index), a National Indicator Framework to align indicators with national data sources, and periodic Voluntary National Reviews (VNRs) submitted to the United Nations. These mechanisms create a rich public data backbone that enables systematic analysis of trends, gaps and policy effectiveness. This paper synthesises the available national monitoring evidence and complementary international assessments to: (a) quantify India's recent trajectory on SDG performance; (b) analyse goal-wise strengths and weaknesses; (c) examine sub-national heterogeneity and the consequences of localisation; (d) evaluate institutional arrangements and financing landscapes; and (e) identify practical policy reforms to accelerate progress. The analysis relies on official national sources and reputable international assessments, aiming to provide policymakers, researchers and practitioners with an evidence-based roadmap for the remaining years before 2030.

Objectives and scope

The paper addresses five linked objectives:

- Document India's aggregate SDG progress since the SDG baseline, highlighting major trends and inflection points.
- Provide a goal-wise assessment to identify which SDGs show strong progress and which remain off track.
- Analyse sub-national (state and district) heterogeneity, with attention to drivers of variation and implications for policy design.
- Assess financing, institutional mechanisms and data systems that underpin implementation.
- Offer actionable policy recommendations to close gaps and accelerate equitable, sustainable progress toward the 2030 Agenda.

The scope is a desk-based synthesis of secondary sources — national indices, policy documents, indicator frameworks and international comparative reports. The paper does not present new primary survey or field data but synthesises publicly available indicator evidence to produce a policy-oriented evaluation.

Data sources and methods

1. Data and documents used Analysis draws primarily on: (a) the national SDG benchmarking exercises (SDG India Index and district indices); (b) India's Voluntary National Review and theme-specific government documents; (c) the National Indicator Framework and MOSPI progress reports; and (d) international comparative reports (SDG Index and

the UN global SDG report). Where appropriate, the paper also draws on published research, sectoral government statistics and peer-reviewed studies that triangulate indicator trends.

2. Analytical approach the paper blends quantitative synthesis and qualitative policy analysis: -

Trend analysis: We summarise composite and goal-wise indicator trajectories over the recent editions of the SDG India Index to characterise national momentum and identify goals with the greatest change. - **Comparative analysis:** India's national performance is contextualised against global trends described in international reports to identify systemic constraints and cross-country lessons. - **Sub-national mapping:** State and district index results are synthesised to reveal geographic heterogeneity, allowing an assessment of the role of localisation and competitive benchmarking.

Policy synthesis: VNRs and government strategy documents inform an assessment of institutional architectures, financing strategies and data systems. - **Limitations:** Reliance on composite indices can obscure within-goal heterogeneity; indicator coverage and timeliness vary across domains, and some environmental metrics require scientific monitoring beyond existing administrative systems.

National trajectory and headline findings

1. **Aggregate progress** Since the SDG baseline, national composite measures show a clear upward trajectory. The SDG India Index reports India's composite score improved from 57 (2018 baseline) to 66 (2020–21) and reached 71 in 2023–24 (NITI Aayog SDG India Index 2023–24) ^[1]. This momentum is attributable to concentrated improvements in poverty reduction measures, better access to electricity and household infrastructure, progress in selected health and education indicators, and rapid expansion of renewable energy capacity. While aggregated improvement is encouraging, composite scores are summaries that may mask distributional shortfalls. Hence, a key strand of the analysis below is unpacking where gains have occurred and which populations or geographies remain underserved.
2. **Interplay with global trends** India's pattern—good progress on social and infrastructure indicators, weaker performance on several environmental goals—mirrors broader global dynamics: many countries have made gains on poverty reduction and access indicators while environmental and biodiversity targets remain widely off track. The UN Sustainable Development Goals Report 2025 ^[5] and the Sustainable Development Report 2025 (SDSN) contextualise these global dynamics and underscore the urgency of addressing environmental, climate and resource-use pressures to avoid reversing social gains.

Goal-wise assessment

strengths, weaknesses, and underlying drivers This section synthesizes goal-level performance into three categories: (A) goals showing notable improvement, (B) goals with mixed or modest progress, and (C) goals lagging or off track. For each category we summarise the evidence and discuss drivers.

1 Goals with notable improvement Goal 1 — No Poverty. Targeted welfare transfers, expansion of social protection programmes and livelihood schemes have contributed to reductions in poverty headcounts and improved service access. Direct Benefit Transfer platforms and targeted food and cash support have helped shore up incomes for vulnerable households. These programme levers, combined with broader economic recovery, explain strong gains in poverty-related metrics.

Goal 7 — Affordable and Clean Energy / Goal 13 — Climate Action. India has seen a rapid scale-up in renewable energy capacity and expanded electricity access. Large national programmes in solar rooftop installations, grid expansion and targeted electrification have materially improved energy access indicators. Concurrently, national climate policies and commitments — alongside investment in renewables — have raised climate action scores in national benchmarking, even as adaptation finance and resilience remain priorities.

Goal 8 — Decent Work and Economic Growth. Labour market recovery after economic shocks and skilling initiatives has moved some employment indicators favourably. While formal job creation remains a challenge, gains in economic activity and targeted skill development schemes have supported upward movement in composite employment metrics.

2 Goals with mixed or modest progress Goal 3 — Good Health and Well-being; Goal 4 — Quality Education. Many India-wide health and education indicators have improved (vaccination coverage, school enrolment), but outcomes remain uneven across states and within population groups. Maternal and child health have shown progress, yet non-communicable disease burdens and quality gaps in health services persist. Education outcomes reflect growing access, but learning outcomes and completion rates need further improvement.

Goal 2 — Zero Hunger. India exhibits mixed performance: while food security programmes and public distribution systems have preserved baseline food access, nutritional challenges — especially under nutrition and micronutrient deficiencies in young children and women — remain serious and have not uniformly improved.

3 Goals lagging or off-track Goals 5, 6, 14 and 15 — Gender Equality; Clean Water & Sanitation; Life Below Water; Life on Land. Gender equality indicators (labour force participation, political representation, asset ownership) show limited progress. Environmental goals — water quality, freshwater availability, biodiversity preservation and land degradation — lag substantially. Pollution, groundwater depletion, ecosystem loss and habitat degradation are persistent constraints that national indices identify as significant areas needing policy attention.

Goal 10 — Reduced Inequalities. Aggregate economic expansion has not translated into uniform improvements across caste, religious, regional and income groups. Disaggregated indicators show persistent disadvantages for marginalised groups on many social and economic dimensions.

Sub-national heterogeneity and localisation

1. **State and district patterns** One of India's most salient SDG features is sub-national heterogeneity. State and district benchmarking exercises reveal wide variance: some states achieve performance levels comparable to

high-income country subnational units for specific goals, while others remain in lower performance bands across multiple goals.

Top-performing states tend to have historically higher human development indicators, better fiscal space for public investment, relatively stronger administrative capacity and robust public service delivery. Conversely, lagging states often face constrained fiscal capacity, weaker governance systems and higher burdens of multi-dimensional deprivation. District-level indices amplify this picture: within many states, districts show dramatic variation — pockets of high performance exist alongside districts with entrenched deprivation. These micro-geographies are crucial for targeting interventions and show the value of district-level benchmarking and planning.

2. Drivers of heterogeneity Key drivers explaining variation include: - Historical investments in health, education and social infrastructure. - Fiscal space and resource mobilisation — both own-revenue capacity and effective utilisation of central transfers. - Administrative and implementation capacity at the state/district level. - Policy choices and governance culture — states that adopt evidence-based policies, invest in monitoring, and incentivise local innovation often outperform peers. - Geography and demography — states with challenging terrains or high population densities face unique constraints.
3. Policy implication: deep localisation the heterogeneity underscores that national frameworks should be paired with robust localisation: targeted, outcome-linked fiscal transfers; technical assistance for weak capacity states; adaptive programme designs; and local participation mechanisms to ensure policies meet on-ground realities.

Financing the SDGs: gaps and instruments

1. Public spending patterns India's public spending on social sectors and infrastructure has increased over recent years. Fiscal allocations to health, education, social protection and flagship programmes have supported measurable indicator gains. Nonetheless, fiscal allocations need prioritisation to ensure long-term investments (clean water infrastructure, ecosystem restoration, adaptation) are funded at scale.
2. Private and blended finance Meeting investment needs—especially for resilient urban infrastructure, water systems, and environmental restoration—will require more than public funds. Leveraging private capital through PPPs, scaling green bonds and fostering blended finance mechanisms that mix concessional multilateral finance with private investors remain policy priorities. Mobilising domestic institutional investors (pension funds, insurance firms) into SDG-aligned assets can augment long-term finance for sustainable infrastructure.
3. International finance and concessional flows Concessional finance, multilateral development bank lending, and climate funds are important to support adaptation and biodiversity projects where domestic finance is insufficient. Strategic use of international concessional flows to de-risk private investment in green infrastructure can catalyse larger private flows.
4. Fiscal governance and tracking Robust public financial management, transparent reporting of SDG-relevant

expenditures, and outcome-based budgeting are essential. Linking conditional grants to measurable SDG outcomes and strengthening audit and evaluation processes will strengthen the impact of spending.

Institutional architecture and governance

1. National coordination India's SDG coordination architecture operates across multiple levels: a central coordinating agency (NITI Aayog) aligns cross-sectoral planning, sector ministries implement goal-relevant programmes, and state governments are responsible for localisation. Nationally convened VNRs and indices provide accountability and public benchmarking.
2. Local governance and participation Urban local bodies and panchayats are frontline implementers for many SDG targets — water, sanitation, local health, and basic education. Strengthening local governance through devolution of funds, capacity building, and transparent citizen engagement mechanisms is essential to close implementation gaps.
3. Data governance and statistical capacity A central constraint is data governance: indicator coverage, timeliness, and disaggregation vary widely. Administrative systems (health MIS, education management information systems) are underutilised for real-time monitoring in many regions. MOSPI's national indicator framework provides a blueprint, but implementation requires state statistical capacity enhancements, integration of administrative datasets, and a national push to standardize and publish disaggregated indicators.

Measurement challenges and opportunities

1. Challenges - Indicator gaps and comparability: Some SDG indicators lack robust national data or are not readily produced at required disaggregation levels. - Timeliness: Lagged release of key indicators prevents timely policy responses. - Disaggregation shortfall: Many datasets cannot be reliably disaggregated by caste, religion, gender, or sub-district units, hindering equity analysis. - Environment monitoring complexity: Ecosystem and biodiversity metrics require scientific and remote sensing capabilities that are unevenly deployed.
2. Opportunities - Administrative data integration: Greater use of administrative records (linked through unique identifiers) can produce high-frequency local indicators. - Geospatial and earth observation data: Satellite imagery and remote sensing can monitor land use, forest cover, water bodies and urban expansion, providing objective measures for environmental targets. - Digital public infrastructure: Digital platforms used in social programmes (DBT, digital health records) can be harnessed for anonymised, aggregated indicator generation. - Dashboarding and transparency: Public dashboards that display state and district performance can support competitive federalism and citizen participation.

Discussion — interpreting the evidence and tradeoffs

1. Why progress is uneven Improvements stem from targeted programmes, political attention to flagship schemes, and innovations in service delivery. Yet unevenness arises from varied fiscal capacities,

differences in administrative competence, diverse demographic profiles and legacy inequalities. Environmental goals require longer timescales and cross-sectoral coordination, explaining their lag relative to access-oriented social indicators.

- Tradeoffs and integrated solutions Rapid economic growth and infrastructure expansion can create tradeoffs with ecological integrity. Integrated development designs that embed nature-based solutions, low-carbon technologies and ecosystem accounting can mitigate tradeoffs. For instance, urban drainage projects that deploy green infrastructure can jointly reduce flood risk (SDG 11), protect water quality (SDG 6) and create urban green spaces (SDG 15).
- The role of competitive federalism and benchmarking Benchmarking (state and district SDG indices) has mobilised political attention and incentivised reforms in some states. Competition spurs innovation, but indices must be complemented by capacity support and fiscal transfers to ensure disadvantaged regions can catch up.

Policy recommendations: To translate recent momentum into durable, equitable SDG outcomes, we propose six interlinked policy directions

- Deepen localisation with outcome-linked financing.
- Scale green and blended finance instruments.
- Strengthen environmental governance and science-based monitoring.
- Operationalise integrated data systems.
- Mainstream equity and disaggregation.
- Institutionalise multi-stakeholder accountability.

Table 1: National SDG Composite Scores (Selected Years)

Year	SDG India Composite Score
2018 (baseline)	57 (SDG India Index baseline)
2020–21	66 (SDG India Index)
2023–24	71 (SDG India Index 2023–24)

Table 2: Selected State SDG Scores (2023–24)

State/UT	SDG Score (2023–24)
Kerala	79
Uttarakhand	79
Tamil Nadu	78
Goa	77
Himachal Pradesh	77
Chandigarh (UT)	77
Karnataka	74
Maharashtra	72
Bihar	57
Jharkhand	62
Nagaland	63

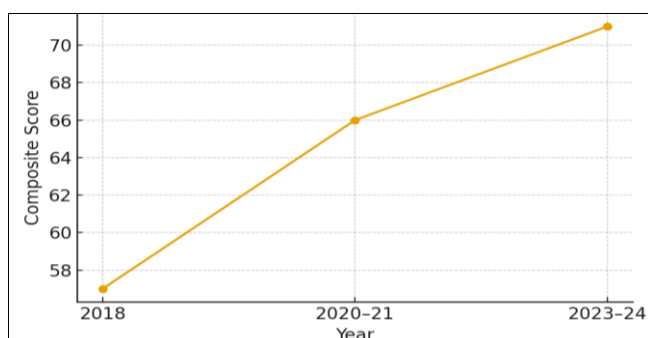


Fig 1: National SDG Composite Score (2018 to 2023–24)

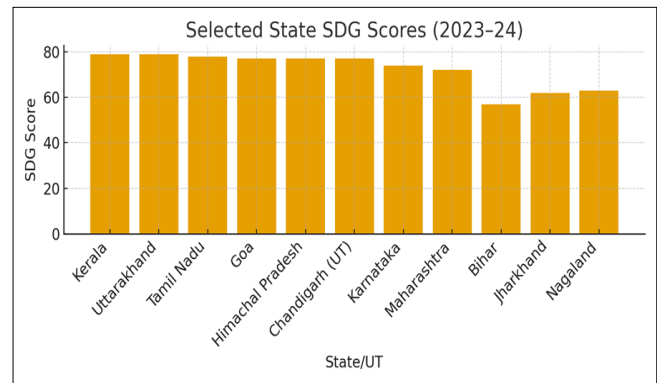


Fig 2: Selected State SDG Scores (2023–24)

Conclusion

India’s SDG journey exhibits both promise and unfinished tasks. Composite indices show measurable improvement in recent years, driven by focused policy action on poverty reduction, energy access and several social indicators. Yet formidable challenges remain: environmental sustainability, gender equality, and distributional equity require urgent and concerted action. The heterogeneity across states and districts underscores the need for deep localisation: outcome-linked finance, capacity building, integrated data systems and targeted policies for marginalized communities. The 2030 Agenda calls for universal, sustained and equitable progress. For India, converting recent gains into durable outcomes requires a pragmatic combination of national vision, sub-national empowerment, fiscal innovation and science-based environmental stewardship. With the right policy mix and institutional investments, India can accelerate its SDG trajectory — benefitting its citizens and contributing substantively to global progress on the SDGs.

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