



## Progress on Sustainable Development Goals in India achievements, challenges and policy directions (2020–2026)

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### Abstract

India plays a central role in achieving the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) adopted by the United Nations in 2015. As the world's most populous country and one of the largest emerging economies, India's development trajectory strongly influences global poverty reduction, gender equality, climate action, and human development outcomes. The period 2020–2026 has been especially critical due to the COVID-19 pandemic, economic disruptions, and increasing climate risks. This paper examines India's performance on six major SDGs—No Poverty, Zero Hunger, Good Health, Quality Education, Gender Equality, and Climate Action—during 2020–2026. Using national and international data sources, the study highlights India's resilience in welfare expansion, vaccination coverage, renewable energy growth, and poverty reduction. However, persistent malnutrition, gender disparities, learning losses, and climate vulnerability remain major concerns. The paper concludes that India's SDG progress is moderate but uneven, requiring stronger policy coordination, increased public investment, and state-level reforms to achieve the 2030 targets.

**Keywords:** Sustainable development goals, India, post-covid recovery, poverty, gender equality, climate change, public policy

### Introduction

The Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) represent a comprehensive global framework designed to promote inclusive, equitable, and sustainable development by the year 2030. Adopted by the United Nations in 2015, the SDGs consist of 17 interconnected goals that address major global challenges such as poverty, hunger, health, education, gender equality, economic growth, and environmental sustainability. These goals emphasize a balanced approach that integrates social, economic, and environmental dimensions of development.

India occupies a unique and highly significant position within the global SDG framework. With a population exceeding 1.4 billion people, India's development outcomes substantially influence global progress toward the 2030 Agenda. The country has one of the largest youth populations in the world, creating both a demographic dividend and a policy challenge in terms of employment, education, and skill development. At the same time, India is among the fastest-growing major economies, contributing significantly to global economic expansion. However, it is also highly vulnerable to climate change impacts, including heatwaves, floods, water scarcity, and air pollution, which pose serious risks to sustainable development.

The period from 2020 to 2026 has been particularly critical for India's SDG trajectory. The COVID-19 pandemic caused severe disruptions in health systems, livelihoods, education, and supply chains, leading to temporary economic contraction. However, the recovery phase witnessed strong policy responses, including the expansion of welfare programs, increased public health investment, and targeted support for vulnerable populations. This period also saw accelerated investment in renewable energy and digital governance transformation, improving service delivery and financial inclusion. Overall, these years provide valuable insights into India's development

resilience, institutional capacity, and the structural challenges that must be addressed to achieve sustainable and inclusive growth by 2030.

### Literature Review

Since 2020, India's progress toward the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) has been shaped by both structural reforms and global disruptions, particularly the COVID-19 pandemic. The United Nations (2023)<sup>[13]</sup> reports that global SDG progress has slowed significantly, and India, as one of the world's largest developing economies, plays a critical role in achieving the 2030 Agenda. India institutionalized SDG monitoring through the NITI Aayog, which publishes the SDG India Index to measure performance across states and union territories. Scholars argue that India has demonstrated strong policy commitment by aligning national initiatives with SDG targets, yet implementation gaps and regional disparities continue to influence outcomes (Kumar, 2023)<sup>[9]</sup>.

In terms of poverty reduction (SDG 1), the World Bank (2023)<sup>[16]</sup> highlights that India achieved substantial reductions in multidimensional poverty over the past decade. However, pandemic-related economic shocks temporarily increased vulnerability, particularly among informal workers and migrant populations. Social protection programs, including food security schemes and rural employment initiatives, mitigated some negative effects, but inequality remains a persistent concern. Studies indicate that poverty reduction is uneven across states, with northern regions facing higher deprivation compared to southern states (Joshi & Narayan, 2022)<sup>[7]</sup>.

Regarding food security and nutrition (SDG 2), India continues to face challenges despite agricultural growth. The International Food Policy Research Institute (2023)<sup>[12]</sup> categorizes India's hunger situation as serious due to high rates of child stunting and anemia. Researchers emphasize

that malnutrition is multidimensional and closely linked with maternal health, sanitation, and women's education (Kaur & Singh, 2024) <sup>[8]</sup>. This suggests that achieving Zero Hunger requires integrated interventions rather than isolated food distribution strategies.

Progress under SDG 3 (Good Health and Well-being) has been supported by expanded health coverage through Ayushman Bharat, which aims to provide affordable healthcare to economically vulnerable populations. The World Health Organization (2024) <sup>[17]</sup> acknowledges improvements in maternal and child health indicators. Nevertheless, public health expenditure remains relatively low compared to global averages, and disparities in healthcare access persist between urban and rural areas (Singh & Yadav, 2023) <sup>[12]</sup>.

In education (SDG 4), India introduced reforms through the National Education Policy 2020 <sup>[4]</sup>, focusing on competency-based learning and digital integration. While enrolment rates remain high, post-pandemic learning losses and digital inequality have emerged as major challenges (Das & Roy, 2023) <sup>[3]</sup>. Experts argue that improving learning outcomes requires enhanced teacher training, infrastructure development, and state-level capacity building.

Gender equality (SDG 5) continues to require significant attention. The UN Women (2023) <sup>[15]</sup> reports low female labour force participation despite improvements in literacy and political representation. Socio-cultural norms and economic barriers continue to limit women's empowerment (Iyer & Krishnan, 2025) <sup>[6]</sup>.

Overall, recent literature portrays India's SDG journey as one of mixed progress. While strong policy frameworks and targeted schemes demonstrate commitment, structural inequalities, financing constraints, and climate vulnerability remain critical barriers. Accelerating progress requires integrated governance, increased public investment, and inclusive, region-specific strategies to ensure sustainable and equitable development by 2030.

### **Institutional Framework for SDG Implementation in India**

India has established a structured and centralized institutional mechanism to coordinate Sustainable Development Goal (SDG) implementation at national and subnational levels. The leadership role is undertaken by NITI Aayog, which functions as the apex policy body responsible for planning, monitoring, and evaluating SDG progress. One of its major contributions is the SDG India Index, an annual composite index that measures the performance of states and union territories across multiple SDG indicators. This index promotes competitive federalism by encouraging states to improve performance through data-driven governance and evidence-based policy reforms. Between 2020 <sup>[2]</sup> and 2026, India strengthened institutional coordination mechanisms, integrating SDG targets into national development strategies, state action plans, and district-level monitoring systems.

Several flagship programmes were aligned with SDG targets during this period. Ayushman Bharat significantly expanded health insurance coverage for economically vulnerable populations, contributing to SDG 3. The Pradhan Mantri Garib Kalyan Anna Yojana ensured food security for millions during the COVID-19 crisis, directly supporting SDG 1 and SDG 2. The National Education Policy 2020 <sup>[4]</sup> introduced structural reforms in the education system

aligned with SDG 4. Gender-focused initiatives such as Beti Bachao Beti Padhao promoted female empowerment under SDG 5, while environmental commitments were guided by the National Action Plan on Climate Change in alignment with SDG 13. Importantly, India strengthened digital governance through Direct Benefit Transfers (DBT), linking welfare schemes to Aadhaar and bank accounts, thereby improving transparency, reducing leakages, and ensuring targeted delivery.

### **SDG 1: No Poverty**

India has made significant strides in reducing multidimensional poverty over the past decade. Despite pandemic-induced disruptions in 2020–2021, large-scale welfare interventions mitigated severe setbacks. During the COVID crisis, free food grains were distributed to nearly 800 million beneficiaries under food security schemes, preventing extreme deprivation. Rural employment was expanded under public works programs, and financial assistance was provided to vulnerable households, women, and farmers. These measures stabilized consumption and reduced immediate distress.

Following economic recovery between 2022 and 2026, poverty levels resumed a downward trajectory due to improved economic growth, increased infrastructure investment, and expanding social safety nets. However, structural challenges remain. Income inequality widened during the pandemic period, particularly affecting urban informal workers who faced employment instability. Interstate disparities also persist, with certain northern and central states experiencing higher poverty rates compared to southern and western regions. Although poverty reduction remains one of India's stronger SDG achievements, sustaining progress requires inclusive growth strategies that generate quality employment opportunities and reduce regional inequalities.

### **SDG 2: Zero Hunger**

Despite achieving self-sufficiency in food grain production, India continues to struggle with nutritional challenges. Child stunting, wasting, and anemia among women remain significant public health concerns. While food availability improved during the pandemic through welfare distribution schemes, structural malnutrition persists due to poverty, inadequate sanitation, maternal health issues, and limited dietary diversity. Nutrition outcomes are influenced by multiple socio-economic factors beyond food supply alone. Government interventions such as mid-day meal schemes, integrated child development services, and public distribution systems helped reduce extreme hunger. However, malnutrition reflects deeper structural inequalities, including gender disparities in food allocation and poor maternal nutrition. Between 2020 and 2026, policymakers increasingly recognized the need for nutrition-sensitive agriculture and integrated health interventions. Nevertheless, SDG 2 remains one of India's relatively weaker performing goals and requires stronger multi-sectoral coordination.

### **SDG 3: Good Health and Well-being**

The health sector witnessed transformative changes during this period. India implemented one of the world's largest COVID-19 vaccination drives, demonstrating strong logistical and institutional capacity. Under Ayushman

Bharat, millions of households gained access to health insurance coverage, improving financial protection against catastrophic medical expenses. Health indicators showed measurable improvement, including declines in infant mortality rates and reductions in maternal mortality ratios. Digital health monitoring systems were expanded, strengthening disease surveillance and healthcare administration. However, public health expenditure remains relatively low compared to global standards. Rural healthcare infrastructure remains uneven, and access disparities persist across states. Additionally, non-communicable diseases such as diabetes, cardiovascular conditions, and cancer are rising rapidly due to urbanization and lifestyle changes. Although progress is evident, long-term investments in preventive care, primary healthcare strengthening, and workforce development are essential to ensure sustained improvements.

#### **SDG 4: Quality Education**

The education sector experienced major disruptions due to prolonged school closures during the COVID-19 pandemic. Remote learning solutions were introduced, but the digital divide widened educational inequalities, particularly affecting rural and economically disadvantaged students. Learning outcomes declined, with evidence of reduced foundational literacy and numeracy skills.

Post-pandemic reforms under the National Education Policy 2020 <sup>[4]</sup> aim to address these gaps by focusing on competency-based education, foundational literacy, skill development, and flexible higher education pathways. The policy promotes multidisciplinary institutions and digital integration to enhance learning quality. Although enrolment rates remain high across primary and secondary levels, concerns regarding teaching quality, teacher shortages, and infrastructure deficits persist. Improving learning outcomes rather than mere enrolment remains the central challenge for SDG 4.

#### **SDG 5: Gender Equality**

Gender inequality continues to be a structural barrier to sustainable development in India. Positive developments include growth in women's self-help groups, improved female literacy rates, and increased representation of women in local governance institutions. These changes reflect gradual socio-economic transformation and policy attention toward gender empowerment.

However, female labour force participation remains low relative to global averages. Wage inequality, occupational segregation, and unpaid care responsibilities limit women's economic engagement. Gender-based violence and discriminatory social norms remain serious concerns. Achieving SDG 5 requires not only policy interventions but also deep socio-cultural reforms that promote economic inclusion, safety, and equal opportunity for women.

#### **SDG 13: Climate Action**

India significantly accelerated renewable energy expansion between 2020 <sup>[2]</sup> and 2026. Solar and wind energy capacities increased substantially, and new commitments were introduced to reduce carbon intensity and promote green hydrogen initiatives. These efforts reflect India's proactive approach to climate mitigation.

However, the country remains highly vulnerable to climate-related risks, including extreme heatwaves, floods, water

stress, and air pollution. Climate change disproportionately affects agriculture, livelihoods, and public health. While mitigation strategies are progressing, adaptation measures require stronger financing and localized planning. Climate resilience must be integrated into infrastructure development, urban planning, and disaster management systems.

#### **Inter-State Disparities**

India's SDG progress varies significantly across states. High-performing states such as Kerala, Tamil Nadu, and Uttarakhand consistently rank higher due to better health infrastructure, education levels, and governance capacity. In contrast, states such as Bihar and Uttar Pradesh face persistent challenges in poverty, health, and education indicators.

These disparities are linked to historical socio-economic conditions, fiscal capacity, institutional effectiveness, and demographic pressures. Reducing interstate inequality is essential for national SDG success because aggregate national progress depends heavily on improvements in lagging states.

#### **Major Structural Challenges**

India's SDG progress continues to be constrained by structural challenges including economic inequality, persistent malnutrition, gender norms, climate vulnerability, public financing gaps, and governance inefficiencies. Rapid urbanization and demographic pressures add complexity to service delivery. Financing gaps remain a critical concern, as achieving SDG targets requires substantial public investment in health, education, infrastructure, and climate resilience. Strengthening institutional capacity and accountability mechanisms is equally important to ensure effective implementation.

#### **Policy Recommendations**

To accelerate SDG progress, India should increase public health spending to strengthen primary healthcare systems and address non-communicable diseases. Nutrition-sensitive agriculture and integrated child development programs must be expanded to combat malnutrition. Female workforce participation should be promoted through skill development, childcare support, and workplace safety measures. Strengthening district-level monitoring systems can improve localized planning and accountability. Climate adaptation funding must be expanded to enhance resilience in vulnerable regions. Finally, improving education quality through teacher training, digital inclusion, and outcome-based assessment is essential to secure long-term human capital development.

#### **Conclusion**

India showed strong resilience and policy responsiveness during the global crisis from 2020 <sup>[2]</sup> onward. After the disruptions caused by the pandemic, poverty reduction efforts gradually resumed, supported by expanded welfare schemes and economic recovery measures. The country also made progress in strengthening health infrastructure, improving access to healthcare services, and expanding renewable energy capacity as part of its sustainable development strategy. At the same time, several structural challenges continue to slow overall progress. High levels of malnutrition, persistent gender inequality, learning losses in

education, and increasing climate vulnerability remain major concerns. These issues highlight that while progress toward the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) is improving, it is still uneven across sectors and regions. Reaching the 2030 SDG targets will require sustained efforts focused on inclusive economic growth, stronger reforms at the state level, better climate resilience planning, and continued public investment in social and environmental sectors. India's development path is especially important because its progress will not only influence national prosperity but also play a significant role in shaping global SDG outcomes.

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