

# THE HINDU

## Editorial Monday, May 1, 2023

### India, its SDG pledge goal, and the strategy to apply

*The country needs to replicate its COVID-19 response plan to succeed in meeting its SDG targets — one that is also pioneering and a nation-wide effort*

**S.V. SUBRAMANIAN**



Photo Credit: Getty Images/iStockphoto

The Prime Minister, Narendra Modi, while addressing the first meeting of Finance Ministers and Central Bank Governors under India's G20 Presidency, held on February 24-25, 2023, expressed concern that "progress on Sustainable Development Goals (SDG) seems to be slowing down". Regardless of the global progress that has been made to date, the sheer population size of India means that realising Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) at a global scale is intrinsically tied to the success of India. There is considerable confidence in India becoming the third largest economy in the world over the next decade. However, translating this growth into progress on social and human development must be equally valued. Seen from this perspective, the Prime Minister's concern deserves immediate attention.

## India's progress is mixed

The SDGs framework sets targets for 231 unique indicators across 17 SDG goals related to economic development, social welfare and environmental sustainability, to be met by 2030. Roughly halfway to the deadline, where does India currently stand with regards to progress on these indicators? Are there lessons from India's recent mobilisation for COVID-19 (a comprehensive response that demonstrated India's ability to deliver at scale for its population) that could be adapted for the SDGs?

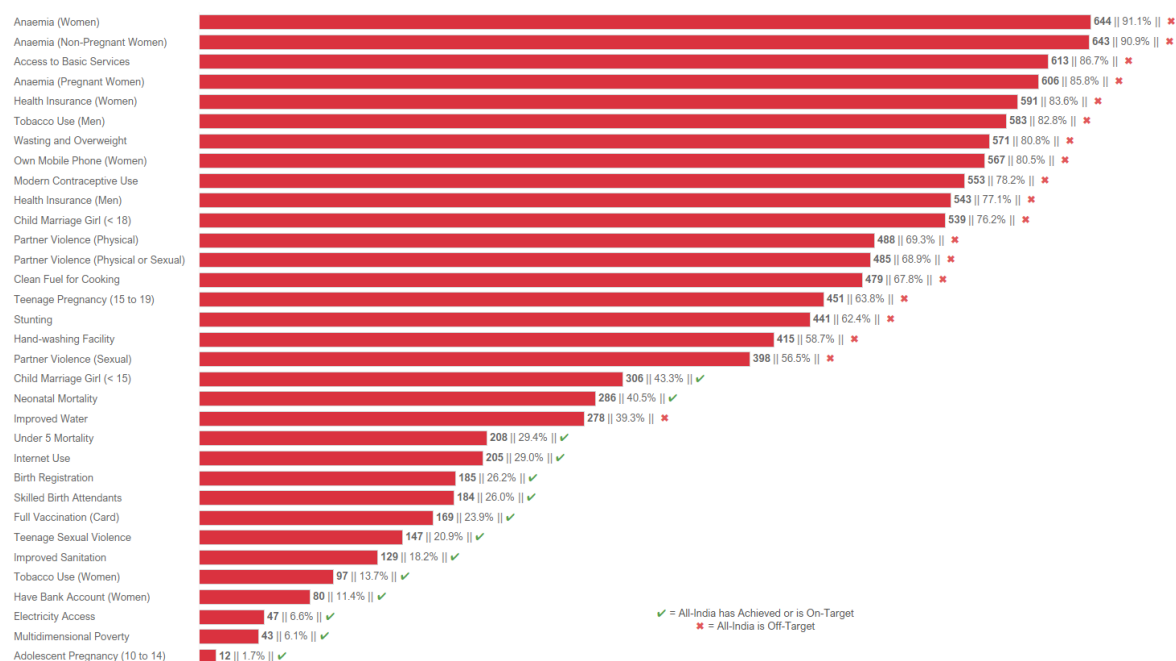
A [recent study](#) assesses India's progress on 33 welfare indicators, covering nine SDGs and providing a mixed picture of positive and concerning trends.

The good news is that India is 'On-Target' to meeting 14 of the 33 SDGs, including indicators for neonatal and under-five mortality, full vaccination, improved sanitation, and electricity access, all of which have substantially improved in the last five years. Unfortunately, the national 'On-Target' designation does not apply equally across all districts. While neonatal and under-five mortality are currently both 'On-Target' for the country, 286 and 208 districts (out of 707 districts), respectively, are not. Similarly, significant progress on access to improved sanitation excludes 129 districts that are not on course to meet this SDG indicator.

Indicators such as eliminating adolescent pregnancy, reducing multidimensional poverty, and women having bank accounts have improved across a vast majority of the districts between the years 2016 and 2021.

Of concern, for 19 of the 33 SDG indicators, the current pace of improvement is not enough to meet SDG targets. Despite a national policy push for clean fuel for cooking, more than two-thirds (479) of districts remain 'Off-Target'. Similarly, some 415 and 278 districts are 'Off-Target' for improved water and handwashing facilities, respectively.

Of heightened concern are SDG indicators for women's well-being and gender inequality. No district in India has yet succeeded in eliminating the practice of girl child marriage before the legal age of 18 years. At the current pace, more than three-fourths (539) of districts will not be able to reduce the prevalence of girl child marriage to the SDG target of 0.5% by 2030. Unsurprisingly, other critical and related indicators such as teenage pregnancy (15-19 years) and partner violence (physical and sexual) that may be tracked back to child marriage are issues that India needs to escalate as priorities. Despite the overall expansion of mobile phone access in India (93% of households), only 56% women report owning a mobile phone, with 567 districts remaining 'Off-Target'. ([More detailed geographical exploration of the SDG indicators.](#))



## Lessons from the COVID-19 approach

Designing and implementing a policy response to a pressing issue is best viewed as an “optimisation problem” relying on political will, responsive administration, adequate resources, and sound data. India adopted an “optimisation” approach to the COVID-19 pandemic and thus, it was given the focus and resources necessary to succeed. There are lessons from this strategy that can inform and optimise India’s approach to its SDG targets.

First, strong and sustained political leadership supported by a responsive administrative structure at all levels, from national to the district level, was critical to the success both of India’s COVID-19 vaccination programme and its efficient rollout of a comprehensive relief package. This rare, nimble political-administrative synergy was willing to learn and undertake course corrections in real-time. Creating a similar mission-oriented ethos that is assessment-oriented and which provides adequate support for accomplishing India’s district-level SDGs is now urgently needed.

Second, India’s success with COVID-19 was largely possible both because of the existing digital infrastructure, as well as new, indigenous initiatives such as the Co-WIN data platform, and the Aarogya Setu application. Following these examples, India must put in place a coordinated, public data platform for population health management, by consolidating its many siloed platforms into an integrated digital resource for district administrators, as well as State and national policy makers.

Finally, a targeted SDG strategy delivered at scale must be executed with the same timeliness of India's COVID-19 relief package. As early as March 2020, the Government of India had put in place the ₹1.70 lakh crore Pradhan Mantri Garib Kalyan Yojana, later augmented to nearly ₹6.29 lakh crore, which included the Pradhan Mantri Garib Kalyan Anna Yojana (₹3.91 lakh crore until December 2022) covering 800 million people. Key to this relief programme was a mix of spending to provide direct in-kind and economic support, as well as measures aimed at revitalising the economy, small businesses, and agriculture. This was critical in blunting the adverse effects of COVID-19, especially for vulnerable and the socio-economically disadvantaged groups. It also measurably demonstrated the value of a proactive, government-supported programme specifically aimed at improving people's well-being.

## **A decadal plan**

India needs to innovate a new policy path in order to meet the aspirations of its people in the decade ahead — there is no historical precedence for a democratic and economically open nation on how to deliver development to a billion-plus people in a manner that is healthy and sustainable. In successfully delivering a real-time response to the COVID-19 pandemic, India has proved that it is possible to deliver at scale in such an ambitious and comprehensive manner. To succeed in meeting its SDG targets, especially those related to population health and well-being, basic quality infrastructure, and gender equality, a similar concerted, pioneering, nation-wide effort would be the need of the hour.

**S.V. Subramanian is a Professor of Population Health and Geography at Harvard University. He is the Principal Investigator of the India Policy Insights initiative at the [Geographic Insights Lab at Harvard](#)**