

A woman in traditional Indian attire, including a colorful sari and a headscarf, is seated and operating a large, circular stone mill. She is using a wooden handle to turn the millstone. The background shows a rustic setting with a thatched roof and a wall with some graffiti. The text "Barriers to implementing sustainable development goals" is overlaid in white on the image.

# Barriers to implementing sustainable development goals

Deepanshu Mohan and Arun Kumar Kaushik analyze some of the challenges that are likely to crop up from the designed path to sustainable development

The twenty first session of the Conference of the Parties (COP) and the eleventh session of the Conference of Parties serving as the meeting of the Parties to the Kyoto Protocol (CMP) took place in Paris last year. As one of the biggest symposiums to discuss climate challenges, organized by the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC), it hosted 147 heads of states and governments. The goal was to establish a 'Paris agreement' as a charter for long term strategy in combating climate change.

The Conference was vital for the future of the whole world, but especially for the developing countries in designing policies on achieving social and economic development while sustainably managing their natural resource endowments and efficiently financing for environmental security. The UN General Assembly's [recent resolution](#) on the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs- adopted on the 25<sup>th</sup> September as *Transforming our world: the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development*) also emphasizes the importance of the 21<sup>st</sup> session of the COP in reaching an ambitious, universal climate agreement.

It would be pertinent to analyze some of the probable challenges that are likely to crop up from the designed path to sustainable development, as laid down by the UN Declaration on SDGs. In this article, we ponder over a range of challenges that developing countries are going to face in fulfilling the ambitious targets set by the UN.

The resolution on SDGs puts 17 major goals and 169 targets in "*building on the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) and complete what they did not achieve*". The MDGs hailed as the '[world's greatest promise](#)' back in 2000 were part of a first universally designed 'to do list' for developing economies in tackling challenges pertaining to global poverty, hunger, health, education etc. A total of 8 goals and 21 targets were cited by the [UN Millennium Declaration \(2000\)](#) "*to create an environment - at the national and global levels alike - which is conducive to development and to the elimination of poverty*".

Critics of the MDGs strongly advocated against a hem-in design, used in defining most of these goals. According to some scholars, it promulgated an enforced consensus of the developed North on the developing South. The designing architecture of the MDGs did avoid

- a) a longer consultative process between those at the UN, the country representatives from developing countries, non-governmental organizations and other civil society members
- b) attaching equitable importance to issues on human rights, climate change, income inequality, peace and security in conjunction with poverty and hunger and more importantly failed to offer
- c) adequate monitoring and evaluative measures in achieving the goals and targets set forth.

The minutiae laid out by the resolution on SDGs attempts to overcome some of the aforementioned issues by allowing for an extensive participatory process between the UN team, the state and non-state representatives from developing member nations, involving diverse civil society groups too. The language of the preamble, albeit ambig-

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uously defined, puts the 4Ps ie. People, Planet, Prosperity with Poverty, at the heart of any policy for attaining 'inclusive' sustainable development.

What does this universal declaration on SDGs mean for India, other developing and less developed countries (LDCs) in designing its own path to achieving 'inclusive, sustainable, peaceful and prosperous' development?

The two defining challenges in accomplishing this 'supremely ambitious and transformational vision' for developing nations lie on the financing and evaluation fronts. In a country like India, where over the last decade the gross expenditure on health as percentage of GDP (public and private expenditure combined) has been around 3-4%, government expenditure on education at around 4-5% of the GDP, it is arcane to imagine how the goals of prosperity and inclusiveness at a sustainable level can be met.

Only recently the Indian central government passed the [seventh pay commission](#), raising the central government wages by approximately 23.5%, which is further likely to push the government's total allocated revenue expenditure (on wages and salaries) from being approximately 17% of the GDP to be up by at least 2-3%.

While we do not wish to contest or undermine the importance of state/central expenditure on wages and salaries in pushing for a consumption driven growth, the financing priorities seem to be misplaced and one which warrants to be made more robust in areas of social sector as a precursor to the 'inclusive, sustainable development' process.

The resolution on SDGs emphasizes on the use of international public finance, through official development assistance (ODA) as a way to 'catalyze additional resource mobilization from both public and private sources'. An ideal way for India, the other less developed countries (LDCs), the landlocked developing countries, and the African countries would be to rather push for greater domestic resource mobilization (eg. incentivizing development with more private sector participation) and financial inclusion (through wider access to credit and banking services) than

depend on ODA and international financial institutions for financing developmental objectives that are endogenously identified by each economy.

Another major challenge in fulfilling the SDGs is on the monitoring and evaluation of targets, while accounting towards sustainable development. The global agenda on SDGs allows the national governments to have the 'primary responsibility for follow-up and review, at the national, regional and global levels' with respect to the progress made in implementing the SDGs and its targets by 2030.

'Monitoring' processes examine whether outlays are being rightly met, whereas 'evaluation' methods examine if the outcomes are being achieved. It is thus prudent to have a sturdy, independent monitoring and evaluative process that can effectively observe and study the national governments' progress on policies towards sustainable development.

As a case the UN declaration does acknowledge the problem that baseline data for several of the targets remains unavailable and could be difficult to gather. However, no specific and definitive answers are provided on how such lacuna can be filled by effectively incorporating a mixed evaluative strategy between *qualitative* and *quantitative* methods for measuring targets like [gender inequality](#).

The need of the hour for Indian planners and other emerging economies requires them to think carefully about the methods, processes and policies that would effectively allow us to move towards sustaining development. Being cautiously optimistic, unless some proactive steps are taken to finance, monitor and evaluate the policies at the national, sub-national level, SDGs are likely to go the MDGs way. ■

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