

India at a Crossroads: SDGs and Cooperation with the EU

by Aayushi Liana Shah

Endorsed by all UN member states in September 2015, the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) represent an ambitious roadmap aimed at achieving a sustainable future for all. The seventeen goals within the SDG agenda address key global challenges like poverty, inequality and climate change, which, along with the 169 associated targets, are to be achieved by 2030.¹

As demanding as this objective may be, one country whose actions are especially important for the attainment of this global objective is India. Home to one-sixth of the world's population, India has been touted as holding the "key to the success of the 2030 Agenda".² Accounting for 30 per cent of the

extreme poor globally, and being host to thirteen of the twenty most polluted cities in the world in 2015, much of the global progress on achieving the SDGs is contingent on progress in this single country.³

India was ranked 110 out of 149 countries surveyed by the 2016 Sustainable Development Report for performance across the seventeen goals.⁴ Since then,

¹ SDG website: *Take Action for the Sustainable Development Goals*, <https://www.un.org/sustainabledevelopment/?p=45262>.

² SDG Knowledge Platform: *India – Voluntary National Review 2020*, <https://sustainabledevelopment.un.org/memberstates/india#review2020>.

³ W.P.S. Sidhu, "SDGs: India's Potential Path to Global Power", in *Brookings Op-eds*, 14 September 2015, <http://brook.gs/2lncFQ8>; Ross Chainey, "Which Is the World's Most Polluted City?", in *World Economic Forum Articles*, 25 June 2015, <https://www.weforum.org/agenda/2015/06/which-is-the-worlds-most-polluted-city>.

⁴ Jeffrey Sachs et al., *SDG Index and Dashboards 2016*, New York, Bertelsmann Stiftung and Sustainable Development Solutions Network (SDSN), July 2016, p. 17, <https://www.sdgindex.org/reports/sdg-index-and-dashboards-2016>; "India Ranks 110th on Sustainable Development Index", in *The Economic Times*, 22 July 2016, <https://economictimes.indiatimes.com/articleshow/53332238.cms>.

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the country has undertaken measures to better integrate the SDGs within its own developmental priorities and to improve engagements with multi-level stakeholders therein.

In the 2020 report, however, India again lost ground, slipping to 117th place in the global ranking.⁵ Although at first glance, this drop seems reflective of a general lack of progress, the reality is more nuanced.

Any assessment should consider the varied and often unequal rates of progress across India's different regions and the selective focus on certain goals by sub-national authorities when it comes to such a large and inherently diverse country like India. In its SDG India Index 2019–20, the National Institution for Transforming India (NITI Aayog), the national body responsible for overseeing the implementation of SDGs, provided a comparative assessment of the performance of its states and union territories.⁶

The index shows that while some states have performed very well across several goals, receiving the "front-runner" tag, others have done so only across a few goals. Moreover, most states have performed less than satisfactorily in certain domains, with SDG 2 (zero hunger) and SDG 5 (gender equality)

registering a particularly dismal record.⁷ A possible reason is that well-meaning decisions taken at the top often struggle to translate into efficient execution on the ground.⁸

On the other hand, five goals have witnessed much improvement country-wide and have led to a higher composite (synthesized across the SDGs) score within this assessment. These are SDG 6 (clean water and sanitation), SDG 7 (affordable and clean energy), SDG 9 (industry, innovation and infrastructure), SDG 15 (life on land), and SDG 16 (peace, justice, and strong institutions).⁹

Novel initiatives of the central government, such as targeted programmes and new, specialised public departments, have contributed towards this progress. The performance on SDG 16, in particular, has benefited from a push for greater institutional transparency and accountability, and the expansion of the *Aadhaar* scheme to provide a biometrics-based unique legal identity to each citizen.¹⁰ Whether this upward trend will continue, however, is uncertain. Questions have been raised over the data privacy under

⁵ Jeffrey Sachs et al., *The Sustainable Development Goals and COVID-19. Sustainable Development Report 2020*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, June 2020, p. 27, <https://www.sdgindex.org/reports/sustainable-development-report-2020>.

⁶ United Nations and NITI Aayog, *SDG India - Index & Dashboard 2019-20*, New Delhi, NITI Aayog, December 2019, <https://niti.gov.in/sdg-india-index-dashboard-2019-20>.

⁷ Ibid., p. 16.

⁸ Pradeep Baisakh and Amitabh Behar, "Sustainable Development Goals in India: Ambitious, but Achievable", in Sachin Chaturvedi et al. (eds), *2030 Agenda and India: Moving from Quantity to Quality. Exploring Convergence and Transcendence*, Singapore, Springer, 2019, p. 265-277; S. Irudaya Rajan and U.S. Mishra, "The State of the States", in *The Hindu*, 12 February 2019, <https://www.thehindu.com/opinion/article26240864.ece>.

⁹ United Nations and NITI Aayog, *SDG India - Index & Dashboard 2019-20*, cit., p. 16.

¹⁰ Ibid., p. 205.

Aadhaar, rising concerns regarding press freedom, and India has also recently been downgraded from “free” to “partly free” in the 2021 Freedom House report.¹¹

The selective focus on goals discussed above is also reflected in the central government’s priority-based approach to the SDGs. This stems largely from pragmatic concerns over the viability of achieving targets while being confronted by the limitations of time and resources, along with different sets of stakeholder interests and priorities. In 2017, India submitted a Voluntary National Review (VNR) Report to the UN High Level Political Forum (HLPF). The report underlined its commitment to seven specific goals – SDG 1 (no poverty), SDG 2, SDG 3 (good health and well-being), SDG 5, SDG 9, SDG 14 (life below water), and SDG 17 (revitalise the global partnership for sustainable development).¹²

Building on this to incorporate all seventeen SDGs, the VNR of 2020 details India’s “paradigm shift to a ‘whole-of-society’ approach”, with the underlying theme of globalisation to localisation.¹³ The spirit of “cooperative [...] federalism” forms the cornerstone of the Indian

effort, with the central and sub-national or state governments working together.¹⁴ To enable it to deliver on its commitments, the central government has launched programmes and campaigns, partnering with regional authorities for their implementation.

An example is the flagship programme, *Swachh Bharat Abhiyaan* or “Clean India Campaign”, which converges with SDG 6.¹⁵ Here, authorities at multiple levels collaborate for improved cleanliness, sanitation and capacity-building at the grassroots level. The 2020 report championed the practice of involving key stakeholders from across society within each stage of the SDGs.¹⁶

This strong focus on sub-national efforts is unique to India, with it being the only country to publicly rank its state governments on SDG performance.¹⁷ An advantage of such reporting is that it could foster healthy competition among states, or in recommending concrete support mechanisms for the underperforming ones.

A vocal proponent of international development cooperation in the 21st century, India advocates strengthening global and regional partnerships over the SDGs, in keeping with SDG 17 itself.

¹¹ Karan Saini, “Aadhaar Remains an Unending Security Nightmare for a Billion Indians”, in *The Wire*, 11 May 2018, <https://thewire.in/government/aadhaar-remains-an-unending-security-nightmare-for-a-billion-indians>; Freedom House, *Freedom in the World 2021. Scores*, February 2021, <https://freedomhouse.org/countries/freedom-world/scores>.

¹² SDG Knowledge Platform: *India – Voluntary National Review 2017*, <https://sustainabledevelopment.un.org/memberstates/india#review2017>.

¹³ SDG Knowledge Platform: *India – Voluntary National Review 2020*, cit.

¹⁴ SDG Knowledge Platform: *India – Voluntary National Review 2017*, cit.

¹⁵ United Nations in India website: *SDG 6: Clean Water and Sanitation*, <https://in.one.un.org/?p=8431>.

¹⁶ SDG Knowledge Platform: *India – Voluntary National Review 2020*, cit.

¹⁷ Urvashi Prasad and Shashvat Singh, “SDG Index 2019: Where Does India Stand?”, in *The Hindu Business Line*, 28 January 2020, <https://www.thehindubusinessline.com/opinion/article30673450.ece>.

Being at the forefront of “South–South cooperation”, India has actively sought partnerships with fellow developing countries.¹⁸ Aspiring to a more influential global role, India also seeks cooperation with other international actors,¹⁹ including the European Union.

While the Strategic Partnership between India and the EU is yet to realise its full potential, sustainable development is a sphere suitable for pragmatic advances. A 2019 report by the Observer Research Foundation in New Delhi suggests using the common framework provided by the SDGs to build a productive partnership,²⁰ given the existence of a successful track record of cooperation on some of these solid goals.²¹ From the range of current and planned initiatives, the India–EU cooperation agenda can be perceived as having prioritised three main areas, each connected to a specific SDG.

The first is enhanced cooperation on water and sanitation, linked to SDG 6. The 2016 India-EU Water Partnership (IEWP) aims to address water security

in India by exchanging knowledge and experience in water management and aiding the Indian government’s Clean Ganga programme.²² In 2019, six EU member-states joined other institutions in signing agreements with the IEWP to support river rejuvenation projects in India.²³

Secondly, cooperation in clean energy and climate coincides with SDGs 7 and 13. In 2016, India and the EU established the Clean Energy and Climate Partnership. Acknowledging that India is on course to generate the highest increase in global energy demand, the two sides agreed to work together on energy efficiency and renewable energy sources.²⁴ The shared emphasis on the Paris Agreement (2015),²⁵ and the International Solar Alliance co-launched by France and India in the same year,²⁶ demonstrate the strong foundations for these endeavours.

Finally, the third area is sustainable urban development, related to SDG 11. The EU–India Partnership for Smart and Sustainable Urbanisation (2017),²⁷ and the EU’s support for India’s

¹⁸ “India to Partner Developing Countries to Achieve Sustainable Development Goals: Kanimozhi Karunanidhi”, in *The Economic Times*, 16 October 2018, <https://economictimes.indiatimes.com/articleshow/66235691.cms>.

¹⁹ Arpita Anant, “Significance of SDGs and India’s Evolving Global Role”, in *IDSAs Comments*, 8 November 2019, <https://idsa.in/node/20310>.

²⁰ Sebastian Paulo, *India-EU Cooperation in the SDG era: Unlocking the Potential of a Development Partnership in Transition*, New Delhi, Observer Research Foundation (ORF), 27 February 2019, <https://www.orfonline.org/?p=48604>.

²¹ European Commission website: *International Partnerships - India*, https://ec.europa.eu/international-partnerships/where-we-work/india_en.

²² IEWP website: <https://www.iewp.eu>.

²³ The Energy and Resources Institute (TERI), *4th India-EU Water Forum Steps Up Cooperation on Water Resources Management in India*, 13 February 2019, <https://www.teriin.org/node/8489>.

²⁴ European Commission, *EU and India Agree on Clean Energy and Climate Partnership*, 31 March 2016, https://ec.europa.eu/clima/news/articles/news_2016033101_en.

²⁵ IISD/SDG Knowledge Hub, *EU, India Partner on Paris Agreement Implementation, Clean Energy*, 16 October 2017, <https://sdg.iisd.org/?p=354676>.

²⁶ International Solar Alliance website: <https://isolaralliance.org>.

²⁷ European Commission, *EU and India*

"Smart City Mission"²⁸ exemplify this focus. The significance of expanding cooperation in these three core areas is also emphasised clearly within the EU–India Agenda for Action-2020, with the hope that persistent efforts will make the SDG Agenda 2030 a reality.

The 15th EU–India Summit, held in 2020, underlined the commitment to each of these three areas within a joint declaration focusing on resource efficiency and clean energy transition, including strategies for long-term greenhouse gas emissions. The two parties also agreed to enhance their partnership in sustainable modernisation.²⁹

An area which has previously been largely on the side-lines but now looks set to take centre stage is healthcare, linked to SDG 3. While the 2016 EU–India Agreement on Scientific and Technological Cooperation includes vaccines within its ambit, a clear and focussed "health partnership" has so far not materialised.³⁰ Perhaps signifying a

Define a Partnership for Smart and Sustainable Urbanisation, 6 October 2017, https://ec.europa.eu/regional_policy/en/newsroom/news/2017/10/10-06-2017-eu-and-india-define-a-partnership-for-smart-and-sustainable-urbanisation.

²⁸ European Cluster Collaboration Platform (ECCP), *EU-Indian Collaboration on Smart Cities Reinforced at the India m2m + IoT Forum in New Delhi*, 12 March 2018, <https://www.clustercollaboration.eu/news/eu-indian-collaboration-smart-cities-reinforced-india-m2m-iot-forum-new>.

²⁹ European Union and India, *Joint Statement - 15th EU-India Summit*, 15 July 2020, <https://europa.eu/!rN36mK>.

³⁰ European Commission website: *Research and Innovation - International Cooperation - India*, [https://ec.europa.eu/info/research-and-innovation/strategy/international-](https://ec.europa.eu/info/research-and-innovation/strategy/international-cooperation/india_en)

shift, the 2020 Summit placed a strong emphasis on increasing healthcare cooperation and solidarity. That this occurred against the backdrop of the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic is no coincidence, with both the EU and India suffering immense health-related and economic losses as a result of the infection statistics and subsequent lockdown restrictions.³¹

Taking note of the EU's strengths in healthcare research and development and India's status as the leading manufacturer of pharmaceuticals and vaccines, the two agreed to improve shared capacities in health security and pandemic crisis management.³² The first EU–India Digital Health Summit is slated for March 2021 and aims to cover potential collaboration on technological developments in healthcare, indicating the rising focus on this area.³³ How this develops in practice (especially in light of India's present role in the global production and distribution of the COVID-19 vaccine) and if there will be a formalisation of healthcare cooperation through agreements and projects between India and the EU still remains to be seen.

[cooperation/india_en](https://ec.europa.eu/info/research-and-innovation/strategy/international-cooperation/india_en).

³¹ World Health Organisation website: *WHO Coronavirus Disease (COVID-19) Dashboard*, <https://covid19.who.int>; World Bank, *The Global Economic Outlook During the COVID-19 Pandemic: A Changed World*, 8 June 2020, <https://www.worldbank.org/en/news/feature/2020/06/08/the-global-economic-outlook-during-the-covid-19-pandemic-a-changed-world>.

³² European Union and India, *Joint Statement - 15th EU-India Summit*, cit.

³³ Digital Health Summit website: <https://digitalhealthsummit.eu>.

Overall, one can say that its status as a fast-growing major economy and the sheer necessity of its success has led India to strive to align its national development agenda with the SDGs. Since 2015, several programmes and initiatives at the national and sub-national levels have produced victories such as a reduction in poverty, increased education levels, improved sanitation and infrastructure, among others. However, the 2030 target is not an easy one, especially for India, which faces hurdles such as a vast and diverse population, low per-capita income, rising energy needs, infrastructural challenges, alongside the non-uniform progress across its states.

Additionally, new hurdles, such as the devastating human, economic and social consequences of the COVID-19 pandemic demand further resilience-building interventions, as well as renewed attention to critical areas. Efficient execution of plans, and spirited cooperation with international partners like the EU are crucial to India's success and thus also the world's progress towards achieving the SGD agenda.

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