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Editorial

Sustainable Development Goals for India

The year 2015 has been a milestone in the international development agenda as it marked the end of the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) set in the year 2000 and marked the formulation of Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) set for 2030. Therefore, it is time to introspect on how far India has achieved the MDG targets even as it prepares to embark on the journey of fulfilling SDGs by 2030. In September 2015, India joined 192 other member states of the United Nations to launch the SDGs which carries forward the development agenda of reducing poverty, hunger and other deprivations with a view to ensure a life of dignity to all its citizens.

According to government estimates, India has managed to halve the incidence of poverty and hunger from the 1990 levels. The Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Act (MGNREGA) and the National Food Security Act (NFSA) have been enacted to expedite the reduction of poverty and hunger. However, the reduction of poverty has been uneven due to rising inequality that pervades the socio-economic sphere. Consequently, poverty is concentrated in poorer states and the incidence of poverty in rural areas is twice that of the urban areas. In addition poverty levels remain high among marginalized communities, such as Scheduled Castes, Scheduled Tribes, female-headed households, and religious minorities, such as the Muslims. Official estimates put India on-track to achieve the hunger targets, but a quarter of the world's undernourished population and over a third of the world's under-nourished children reside in India. Besides, India has a third of the world's food-insecure people. Limited employment creation in spite of high economic growth has resulted in rising inequalities and persistence of poverty and hunger.

On education, official data indicate that India has achieved gender parity in primary school enrollment as well as in secondary and tertiary education. However, India is lagging behind in achieving universal primary school enrolment in spite of programmes such as Sarva Shiksha Abhiyan and Right to Education Act. Large numbers of children have either not gone to school or have dropped out of school before

completing their primary education. Besides, the quality of education is a serious concern with a majority of children having poor learning outcomes. In addition, India is also lagging behind in achieving universal youth literacy though literacy levels have increased substantially during the last 15 years.

On health, India has been able to reduce maternal mortality by three-quarters of 1990 levels due to various health schemes such as the National Rural Health Mission (NHRM) and Janani Suraksha Yojana (JSY). India has also been able to control the spread of deadly diseases such as HIV/AIDS, malaria and tuberculosis. However, India has not been able to reach goals for reduction of child and infant mortality.

India has also increased its forest cover and halved the proportion of the population without access to clean drinking water. However, India has failed in achieving the goal of improving access to adequate sanitation to eliminate open defecation.

Finally, India has failed to reach goals of empowering women through wage employment as NSSO data shows that female labour force participation rate has declined. In addition, India has failed to improve political participation of women. Though it has ensured 33 to 50 per cent participation of women in local bodies in several states, it has not been able to pass the legislation ensuring one-third representation of women in the Parliament and legislative assemblies.

The Sustainable Development Goals that have come into effect from 1 January 2016 have a total of seventeen goals and 169 indicators. Some goals are about completing the unfinished work of the MGDs, such as eradicating poverty and hunger, ensuring good health, clean water and sanitation, quality education to children, ensuring gender equality and revitalizing global partnerships for sustainable development. The new goals set for sustainable development include ensuring access to affordable clean energy, providing decent work with sustainable economic growth, promoting sustainable industrialization through innovation and infrastructure, reducing inequalities, building sustainable cities, ensuring sustainable production and consumption patterns, combating climate change, conserving marine resources, protecting terrestrial ecosystems, forests and bio-diversity; and promoting just, peace inclusive societies. Having signed the SDG Agenda, it is incumbent on the Indian Government to fulfil its international obligations

by adhering to the Sustainable Development Goals, unlike the tardy implementation of the Millennium Development Goals.

In the context of this historic opportunity for India to showcase its compliance of internationally set development goals, this issue of Social Action invited papers on the topic, “Sustainable Development Goals: Opportunities and Challenges”.

The Governments at the Centre and the States have introduced several welfare schemes to remove hunger and poverty among the rural poor. Dr. P. Raghupati’s paper titled, “Impact of Rural Developmental Programmes on Landless Dalits”, is an assessment of the rural development programmes in a village in Chittoor District of Rayalseema region of Andhra Pradesh. These programmes are primarily aimed at income enhancement, food and nutritional security and providing basic minimum services such as health and housing. The findings reveal a great deal of irregularities leading to the exclusion of Dalit families, who should have been the main beneficiaries of these schemes. Consequently, these schemes have not produced the desired results in terms of eradication of poverty and hunger among the marginalized communities.

Giving a tribal perspective of development programmes for indigenous peoples, Pradyumna Bag argues in favour of a role for indigenous institutions in sustainable resource management in tribal-dominated regions of the country. His paper, “Myth and Reality of Sustainable Development: View from a Village” is a critique of the Watershed Development Project undertaken by the Government in Paria village of Kalahandi District in Odisha. This project turned out to be unsustainable as it encroached on fallow land and water bodies in addition to undermining indigenous sustainable institutions.

Vincent Ekka’s article on “Sustainable Development, Disparity and Emerging Governance Issues” is a critique of the imposition of western models of development in the Indian context without taking into account local, regional, geographical and cultural differences. Such approaches have proved to be counterproductive to the goals of sustainable development. He argues that sustainable development requires a restructuring of the economy that allows for multiple models public and private investments in addition to public-private partnerships in order to achieve the goals of development.

In his article, “Conceptualising the Goal of Sustainable Development

in Indian Environmental Jurisprudence”, S.N. Kulkarni has made a remarkable attempt to understand the conceptualization of sustainable development in Constitutional articles and legal provisions. The paper traces the various laws enacted and judgements delivered on the environment, forests, wild life, bio-diversity to argue for the need for sustainable development to be a legally enforceable norm in order to ensure compliance of all sections of society to the fulfilment of the goals of sustainable development.

Anjali Radkar’s paper on “MDG 5: Indian Scenario” is an assessment of India’s record on the fifth MDG on reducing maternal mortality. Using various government data, she shows how the Maternal Mortality Ratio (MMR) declined rapidly during the first fifteen years of the twenty-first century. However, there are huge variations in the performance of states requiring policy interventions in states with high MMR in order to achieve below 100 MMR levels in the near future.

As India embarks on the path towards fulfilling the Sustainable Development Goals it has committed itself to, these articles will be a useful source of information for policy makers and civil society organizations to ensure that the benefits of development reaches all sections of society in our country.

Denzil Fernandes