



Review Article

Bridging Gaps and Ensuring Equity: Role of Quality Education in Sustainable Development Goal-4

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Abstract

The National Education Policy (NEP) 2020 in India is intended to correspond with the global education agenda, particularly Sustainable Development Goal 4 (SDG-4), which aims to ensure inclusive and equitable quality education for all by 2030. The NEP 2020 proposes to completely rebuild and refocus India's education system in order to address current difficulties and promote holistic growth. The policy also intends to close access and quality gaps by supporting a flexible and inclusive system that meets varied learning requirements and contributes to the achievement of the Sustainable Development Goal for Quality Education. This paper provides a succinct overview of how the National Education Policy and the Sustainable Development Goal synergize, emphasizing their potential to facilitate holistic and sustainable development in India to achieve the goal of Quality Education. It examines the trends in education attainments at all levels of Education in India and explores some major challenges facing the quality education and accessibility issues in education sector. Also, discuss the various government measures to attain the goal of Quality Education in an effective manner.

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INTRODUCTION

Education and literacy are crucial societal indicators that play an important part in improving a country's overall socioeconomic growth. The Indian government is expected to adopt the New Education Policy (NEP) through a consultative process, emphasising education as the cornerstone of human resource development. To meet the changing dynamics of

today's requirements for quality education, innovation, and research, the NEP intends to transform India into a knowledge hub by providing its students with skill development and upgrading opportunities such as ICT and vocational training. India has made great progress towards the objective of education for all. Constitutionally, various significant programs and initiatives have been launched to provide free and

compulsory education to all children aged six to fourteen years as a Fundamental Right. Initiatives like Sarva Shiksha Abhiyan (SSA) and Right to Education (RTE) have provided much-needed energy to India's education system. Though it has greatly increased primary school attendance rates across the country, the quality concern in terms of learning outcomes must still be addressed. One of the goals of the Sarva Shiksha Abhiyan has been to achieve universalisation of elementary education that addresses both out of school children during the primary school going age and the children who were forced to drop out before completion of primary grade classes due to social and economic compulsions. As a result, the Twelfth Five Year Plan (2012-17) prioritised increasing, improving quality, and ensuring equal educational opportunities for all segments of society. In comparison to the world's greying population, India has an advantage due to its young population, which has an average age of 29 years. The demographic dividend can be realised through improvements in health, education, and skill development. Given this background, the paper broadly examines how India is aligning Sustainable Development Goal 4 (quality education) with its national priorities by integrating it into the New Education Policy, and the positive impact this has on improving education (Pandey, 2018).

National Education Policy (2020)

The National Education Policy (NEP) 2020, approved by the Indian Cabinet in July 2020, replaced the earlier policy from 1986. The new policy is intended to address the changing demands of the twenty-first century. This plan seeks to transform education by emphasising flexibility, inclusion, and a comprehensive approach to education. Its emphasis on early childhood education, as well as a recognition of the vital role that fundamental literacy and numeracy play in shaping a student's educational career, are two of its distinguishing features. The NEP 2020 promotes an interdisciplinary approach that fosters critical thinking and problem-solving abilities while giving students the freedom to select from a wide range of disciplines. The policy also emphasises the importance of vocational training, the use of technology in education, and the transition to competency-based examinations. The NEP 2020, which seeks to increase education's relevance, equity, and competitiveness in the global market, is well positioned to guide India's educational institutions into a new era of creativity and quality education (Sharma, 2024).

The National Education Policy 2020 (NEP 2020) is the first education policy of the 21st century, designed to meet the country's growing development needs. The Policy proposes revising and overhauling all aspects of the education structure, including regulation and governance, in order to create a new system that is consistent with the aspirations of 21st century education, including Sustainable Development Goal 4 (SDG4), while drawing on India's traditions and value systems. The National Education Policy for 2020 asks for a restructuring of the country's school and higher education systems to make education more student-centred and multidisciplinary. It aims to bring about major reforms in school and higher education

across the country in an effective manner (Annual Report, 2022–23).

Sustainable Development Goal 4 (Quality Education)

Sustainable Development Goal 4 (SDG 4) is a key global effort to ensure that everyone has access to quality, fair, and inclusive education. SDG 4—which is envisioned as a component of the UN 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development—acknowledges education as a key factor in the advancement of sustainability in a number of areas. The objective is to ensure that all people have free access to high-quality primary and secondary education, with a focus on eliminating inequalities based on gender, economic position, and other variables. SDG 4 also includes technical and vocational education to help people gain the skills needed for today's fast-changing job market. Recognising education's role in promoting inclusive and peaceful societies, the agenda emphasises the importance of safe learning environments. SDG 4 also aims to build a fair and sustainable society by encouraging education for sustainable development and fostering global citizenship. SDG 4, which acknowledges education as a powerful motivator for societal advancement and individual empowerment on the way to global sustainable development, is, in essence, the core of the 2030 Agenda. (Sharma, 2024).

SDG 4 defines the following terms

Inclusive: The United Nations Educational, Scientific, and Cultural Organisation (UNESCO) defines inclusive education as "a process that helps to overcome barriers limiting learners' presence, participation, and achievement." The goal is for everyone to have 'full involvement and access to great learning opportunities'.

Equitable: Inclusivity and equity are closely intertwined. In education, the term equity relates to the principle of fairness, which means ensuring that personal and social conditions, such as gender, socioeconomic level, or ethnic origin, do not prevent students from reaching their educational potential.

Quality Education: Quality education is an important tool for combating poverty, establishing democracies, and promoting peaceful society. Quality education empowers individuals, gives them voice, unlocks their potential, opens pathways to self-actualisation, and broadens perspectives to open minds to a pluralist world. Quality education is a dynamic term that varies over time and in response to changes in the social, economic, and environmental conditions of a given location. Since quality education should reflect local needs and cultural context, it will look different in different parts of the world (UNESCO, 2005).

Lifelong Learning: Learning is 'not tied to a specific age (childhood and adolescence), but continues throughout life'. Hence, learning education should be available for every age and gender; in all contexts (family, school, community, workplace, etc.); cover all levels (school to higher education); and be delivered through formal and non-formal channels to cover out-of-school learners (Legal Guide, 2022).

How does Sustainable Development Goals (SDG-4) differ from the Millenium Development Goal (MDGs) and from Education for all (EFA)?

As a global education agenda, SDG4 differs from both the education-related Millenium Development Goal (MDGs) and from Education for all (EFA) in scope, geographical coverage and policy focus.

Table 1: compares the global education agendas: MDG2, EFA, and SDG4

GLOBAL EDUCATION AGENDAS			
	MDG2	EFA	SDG4
Scope	Primary Education (children)	Basic Education (children, youth & adults)	Basic Education; Post Basic Education & Training; Lifelong perspective
Geographical Coverage	Low-income countries Conflict-affected	While universal in intention, in practice it focused on lower-income countries	Universal agenda for all countries regardless of income level and/or development status
Policy Focus	Access to and completion of Primary Education for all	Access to Quality Basic Education for all	Access to Quality Basic Education for all; + Equitable access to Post-Basic Education & Training; Relevance of learning for both work and 'global citizenship.

Sources from (UNESCO: Unpacking Sustainable Development Goal 4 Education 2030)

Goal 4 of the SDGs on Education affirms that: Ensure Inclusive and Equitable Quality Education and Promote Lifelong Learning Opportunities for all, states that:

- ✓ By 2030, all girls and boys should receive free, fair, and high-quality primary and secondary education that leads to meaningful learning outcomes.
- ✓ By 2030, all girls and boys should have access to quality early childhood care, development, and pre-primary education to prepare them for school.
- ✓ By 2030, all women and men should have equal access to affordable, high-quality technical, vocational, and higher education—including universities—so they can gain the skills needed for work, life, and personal development.
- ✓ By 2030, significantly increase the number of children and adults with the skills they need—especially technical and vocational skills—for jobs, decent work, and entrepreneurship.
- ✓ By 2030, close gender gaps in education and ensure equal access to all levels of education and vocational training for vulnerable groups, including people with
- ✓ By 2030, ensure reading and numeracy for all youth and a significant number of adults, regardless of gender. (Barrett, Duggan, Nikel, & Ukpo, 2006).
- ✓ By 2030, all learners should have the knowledge and skills to promote sustainable development. This includes education for sustainable lifestyles, human rights, gender equality, promoting a culture of peace and non-violence,

global citizenship, and valuing cultural diversity and its contribution to sustainable development. (Pandey, 2018).

Policy Recommendation to achieve the target

- Remove barriers that hinder equity, inclusion and quality at all levels of education.
- Improve classroom strategies for holistic teaching, learning and evaluation.
- Expand learning opportunities through non-formal and other flexible learning strategies.
- Increase and ensure the supply of a motivated, supported, qualified, adequately resourced and empowered teaching force.
- Strengthen monitoring of inclusion, equity and quality by ensuring mechanisms are in place and capacity is available (UNESCO, 2019).
- Incorporate early education into national education plans with targets and accountability procedures, allocating 10% of the education budget to preschool.
- Improve education officials' ability to plan, implement, and evaluate preschool education as a whole.
- Make sure that a high-quality preschool education is provided by: i) having a curriculum that is appropriate and relevant to enable smooth transitions between educational subsystems; ii) providing high-quality teacher training and mentoring that encourages play and active, responsive, child-centered pedagogical approaches; iii) having educational materials that are appropriate and of high quality; and iv) having strong quality assurance mechanisms that sufficiently direct decision-making.
- Work together with families, communities, private organizations, and society as a whole to improve both access to and the quality of early childhood education.
- Advocate for creative preschool education options for marginalised children, including migrants, indigenous children, those with disabilities, and those impacted by conflict and emergencies. (UNICEF, 2023).

CONCLUSION

In conclusion, the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) and the National Education Policy (NEP) are not separate efforts but closely connected parts of a shared vision. Together, they form a comprehensive approach to sculpting a brighter and more equitable future for India. The collective impact of Sustainable Development Goal 4 and the National Education Policy 2020 is transformative for global education. SDG 4, with its strong focus on inclusive and quality education, provides a global framework that unites countries in a common goal—to reduce educational inequalities and ensure that all individuals, regardless of background, have access to meaningful learning opportunities throughout their lives. By promoting collaboration and encouraging countries to learn from each other's successes and challenges, SDG 4 and NEP 2020 play a key role in advancing the global movement toward inclusive, equitable, and high-quality education for all, inclusive, and

equitable education and provides various governmental initiatives to achieve the goal of Quality Education in an effective way. It represents a critical step forward in shaping a brighter future through education, fostering a generation equipped with the knowledge and skills needed to navigate the complexities of the 21st century.

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