



Review Paper

# Sustainable Development Goals in India: Progress, Challenges, and Future Directions

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## Abstract

India has integrated the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) into its national development agenda since 2015. NITI Aayog monitors the progress through the SDG India Index, while the Ministry of Statistics and Programme Implementation (MoSPI) uses the National Indicator Framework (NIF). According to the Sustainable Development Report 2025, India's SDG score is 65.0, ranking 143 out of 193 countries. Progress is visible in areas like health, energy access, and digital connectivity, but major challenges remain in gender equality, the environment, and institutional strength. The SDG India Index 2023–24 shows wide differences among states, which highlights the need for localised strategies. Labour Force Surveys indicate improvement in female participation, but the quality of employment remains a concern. This paper analyses India's progress, the main challenges, and future directions towards achieving the 2030 Agenda.

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## 1. INTRODUCTION

The Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) were adopted by all United Nations member states in 2015 as a global blueprint to end poverty, protect the planet, and ensure prosperity for all by 2030. These 17 goals and 169 associated targets address critical areas including health, education, gender equality, clean energy, economic growth, climate action, and sustainable governance. India, as one of the world's largest developing

countries, has a critical role to play in the global success of this agenda.

India's commitment to sustainable development builds upon its earlier experience with the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs). While the country achieved significant progress in areas such as poverty reduction, primary education, and maternal health under the MDGs, it also faced challenges in environmental protection, inequality, and social inclusion. Learning from this experience, India has integrated the SDGs

into its national development framework, aligning them with key national policies such as Make in India, Digital India, Skill India, Swachh Bharat Mission, Jal Jeevan Mission, and Ayushman Bharat.

The NITI Aayog has been designated as the nodal agency for SDG coordination, monitoring, and reporting in India. It publishes the SDG India Index, which tracks the progress of all states and Union Territories across multiple indicators. Similarly, the Ministry of Statistics and Programme Implementation (MoSPI) has developed the National Indicator Framework (NIF) to provide a comprehensive statistical basis for monitoring SDG targets. These instruments allow the government, researchers, and civil society to evaluate performance, identify gaps, and plan interventions accordingly. Despite these efforts, India faces significant challenges in achieving all SDGs uniformly. According to the Sustainable Development Report 2025, India ranks 143rd out of 193 countries with a score of 65.0. While progress is evident in areas such as electricity access, digital connectivity, maternal and child health, and sanitation, serious gaps persist in gender equality, employment quality, environmental sustainability, and institutional capacity. These challenges are further complicated by regional disparities, with southern and western states generally performing better than many central and northern states.

India's SDG implementation has also adopted a whole-of-society approach, emphasising partnerships between government, private sector, civil society, and local communities. The Voluntary National Review (VNR) 2025 submitted to the United Nations highlights localisation of SDGs, data-driven policymaking, and financial and technological partnerships as key strategies for progress. This approach recognises that achieving sustainable development is not solely a government responsibility but requires collective action across sectors.

In this context, a detailed study of India's progress, challenges, and future directions becomes essential. Understanding the areas where India has excelled, as well as those where performance remains weak, provides insights into policy effectiveness, governance capacity, and strategic priorities. This paper examines India's SDG performance using authentic sources such as the SDG India Index, National Indicator Framework, national surveys, and international reports, with the aim of offering a comprehensive analysis of the country's path towards sustainable development by 2030.

## MAIN OBJECTIVE:

1. To analyse India's progress towards achieving the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), identify the key challenges, and suggest future directions for inclusive and sustainable development by 2030.

## 2. METHODOLOGY: SOURCES AND DATA

This paper is based on authentic and official sources:

- **Global data:** Sustainable Development Report (SDR) 2025 by SDSN.

- **India-level monitoring:** NITI Aayog's SDG India Index 2023–24.
- **Official statistics:** National Indicator Framework (NIF), National Family Health Survey (NFHS), Periodic Labour Force Survey (PLFS), and Sample Registration System (SRS).
- **Policy reviews:** India's Voluntary National Reviews (VNR) at the United Nations in 2020 and 2025.

## 3. India's Overall Progress

India's overall progress towards the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) reflects a mixed picture of achievements and challenges. According to the Sustainable Development Report (SDR) 2025, India secured an overall SDG Index score of 65.0, placing it 143rd among 193 countries. This ranking shows that while the country has made notable improvements in certain sectors, considerable gaps still exist in areas such as gender equality, environment, and governance.

One of the positive developments has been in the area of basic services and infrastructure. India has achieved near-universal access to electricity and has expanded renewable energy capacity significantly. Initiatives such as the Jal Jeevan Mission and the Swachh Bharat Mission have brought improvements in water supply and sanitation, especially in rural areas. Similarly, progress in healthcare is visible through the reduction of maternal and infant mortality rates, higher rates of institutional deliveries, and expanded immunisation coverage. These achievements demonstrate that policy interventions backed by strong political will can produce measurable outcomes.

Another encouraging trend is the improvement in labour force participation, particularly among women. The Periodic Labour Force Survey (PLFS) for 2023–24 and early 2025 shows a rise in women's participation in the workforce. However, most of these jobs are still in the informal sector or in low-paying roles, which limits their contribution towards achieving true gender equality and economic empowerment. At the global level, the Global Gender Gap Report 2025 ranked India 131 out of 148 countries, showing that despite small gains, gender disparity continues to be a major concern.

The SDG India Index 2023–24, published by NITI Aayog, highlights the large variation in performance across states. Southern states like Kerala and Tamil Nadu continue to perform well in education, health, and gender equality indicators, while several states in central and northern India are still lagging behind. This shows that India's path to achieving the SDGs is uneven and highly dependent on regional governance capacity and local conditions.

On the other hand, India faces serious challenges in environmental sustainability. Rising greenhouse gas emissions, dependence on coal for energy, air pollution, and the impacts of climate change pose long-term risks. Although India has pledged to achieve net zero emissions by 2070, balancing economic growth with environmental commitments remains difficult.

In terms of international engagement, India's Voluntary National Review (VNR) 2025 presented at the UN emphasised

a “whole-of-society” approach, stressing localisation of SDGs, financial partnerships, and data-driven governance. This demonstrates India’s willingness to align its domestic priorities with global commitments.

#### 4. Progress on Selected Goals

India’s journey towards the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) has been uneven, with significant achievements in certain areas and persistent challenges in others. A closer look at selected goals provides a clearer picture of the country’s progress.

##### 4.1 SDG 1: No Poverty

India has made visible progress in poverty reduction. Multidimensional Poverty Index (MPI) estimates suggest that millions of people have moved out of poverty in the last decade, largely due to expanded social protection, rural employment schemes, and food distribution systems. Flagship initiatives such as MGNREGA, Pradhan Mantri Garib Kalyan Yojana, and PM Awas Yojana have played an important role in providing livelihood security, basic housing, and safety nets. However, poverty reduction has not been uniform across states and districts. States like Bihar, Jharkhand, and Uttar Pradesh continue to show higher levels of poverty, which highlights the challenge of addressing regional inequality.

##### 4.2 SDG 2: Zero Hunger

Food security remains a mixed story. On one hand, India runs the world’s largest Public Distribution System (PDS), which provides subsidised food grains to over 800 million people. Schemes like POSHAN Abhiyaan and the Integrated Child Development Services (ICDS) aim to reduce malnutrition among women and children. Despite these programmes, child malnutrition and anaemia remain serious issues. The National Family Health Survey (NFHS-5) highlighted that more than one-third of children under five years are stunted, and more than half of women are anaemic. Thus, while India has improved access to food, nutritional quality and dietary diversity remain challenges.

##### 4.3 SDG 3: Good Health and Well-being

India has registered progress in maternal and child health indicators. Institutional deliveries have increased significantly, leading to a reduction in the maternal mortality ratio (MMR). Infant and under-five mortality rates have also declined, reflecting the impact of better healthcare access and government schemes like Ayushman Bharat, which provides health insurance to vulnerable households. Yet, the healthcare system still struggles with uneven access, a shortage of doctors and nurses, and urban-rural gaps. Non-communicable diseases such as diabetes, heart disease, and cancer are also rising, creating a dual burden of communicable and lifestyle-related illnesses.

##### 4.4 SDG 4: Quality Education

Education remains central to India’s sustainable development journey. Over the past decade, India has expanded school enrolment significantly, achieving near-universal access at the primary level. Schemes like Sarva Shiksha Abhiyan, Samagra Shiksha, Mid-Day Meal Scheme, and Kasturba Gandhi Balika Vidyalayas have helped improve access and retention. The Right to Education Act (2009) laid a strong foundation for universal education. More recently, the National Education Policy (NEP) 2020 has introduced reforms focusing on holistic development, digital learning, vocational skills, and mother-tongue instruction at the foundational level. Gross enrolment ratios in higher education have also improved, with women increasingly represented in colleges and universities. Despite these gains, India faces persistent challenges in ensuring quality and equity in education. Learning outcomes remain a concern, as highlighted by the Annual Status of Education Report (ASER), which shows that many children in elementary schools struggle with basic reading and arithmetic. Teacher shortages, poor infrastructure in rural schools, and digital divides during the COVID-19 pandemic further widened learning gaps. Dropout rates are higher among girls, Scheduled Castes (SCs), Scheduled Tribes (STs), and economically weaker sections. While enrolment has improved, employability and skill alignment with labour markets remain limited. To achieve SDG 4, India must strengthen teacher training, invest in digital education infrastructure, and focus on early childhood care and education (ECCE). Bridging rural-urban and gender divides, ensuring inclusive education for children with disabilities, and improving vocational training under NEP 2020 are critical steps. India’s young demographic dividend can be realized only if education outcomes are significantly improved.

##### 4.5 SDG 5: Gender Equality

Progress towards gender equality has been gradual. According to the Periodic Labour Force Survey (2023–24), female labour force participation has improved compared to earlier years. Women’s representation in higher education is also increasing. However, most female workers remain engaged in informal, unpaid, or low-paying jobs. At the global level, India’s rank in the Global Gender Gap Report 2025 remains low (131 out of 148 countries). Gender-based violence, lack of access to economic opportunities, and underrepresentation in leadership roles continue to limit progress.

##### 4.6 SDG 6: Clean Water and Sanitation

The government has prioritised safe drinking water and sanitation through programmes like the Jal Jeevan Mission and Swachh Bharat Mission. Rural households with piped water connections have increased rapidly, and open defecation has decreased drastically. Nevertheless, concerns about water quality, management of wastewater, and unequal access across states remain. Urban areas also face challenges of water scarcity and groundwater depletion.

#### 4.7 SDG 7: Affordable and Clean Energy

India has achieved near-universal electricity access. The country has also expanded renewable energy capacity, with ambitious targets for solar and wind power. The Ujjwala Yojana has provided millions of poor households with clean cooking fuel, reducing dependence on traditional biomass. Despite this, issues like affordability, reliability of power supply, and high dependence on coal continue to pose barriers to achieving full sustainability in the energy sector.

#### 4.8 SDG 8–9: Decent Work, Industry, Innovation, and Infrastructure

Economic growth has created new job opportunities, especially in services and digital industries. India's expanding start-up ecosystem and infrastructure development projects have boosted innovation and connectivity. However, unemployment among youth remains a serious concern, and the majority of workers are still employed in the informal sector without social security. Bridging the gap between economic growth and quality employment remains a key challenge.

#### 4.9 SDG 10: Reduced Inequalities:

India has made mixed progress in reducing inequality. On the one hand, social protection schemes like MGNREGA, PM-KISAN, Ayushman Bharat, and targeted subsidies have supported vulnerable populations. Affirmative action in education and employment continues to provide opportunities for Scheduled Castes (SCs), Scheduled Tribes (STs), and Other Backward Classes (OBCs). The Jan Dhan Yojana has enhanced financial inclusion, bringing millions of low-income households into the banking system. Similarly, Aadhaar-enabled Direct Benefit Transfers (DBT) have reduced leakages and ensured that welfare schemes reach the intended beneficiaries. However, income and wealth inequality remain significant. Oxfam India's Inequality Report 2024 shows that the top 10% hold more than 70% of the country's wealth, while large sections of the population lack access to basic services. Regional inequality is also stark—southern and western states are more advanced in human development compared to central and eastern states. Gender and social inequalities persist, with women and marginalized communities facing lower wages, limited job opportunities, and restricted access to healthcare and education. To achieve SDG 10, India needs stronger redistributive policies, inclusive urbanization strategies, and better representation of disadvantaged groups in governance and decision-making.

#### 4.10 SDG 11: Sustainable Cities and Communities:

India's urban population is projected to cross 600 million by 2031, making sustainable urbanization a critical priority. Initiatives such as the Smart Cities Mission, Atal Mission for Rejuvenation and Urban Transformation (AMRUT), and Pradhan Mantri Awas Yojana (PMAY) have focused on affordable housing, improved sanitation, urban mobility, and green infrastructure. The Swachh Bharat Mission has led to cleaner cities and improved solid waste management in many

municipalities. Metro rail expansion, electric mobility policies, and renewable energy adoption in cities are positive developments.

Despite these efforts, rapid and unplanned urbanization poses major challenges. Many Indian cities struggle with air pollution, traffic congestion, waste management, and inadequate affordable housing. Informal settlements and slums continue to expand, exposing millions to unsafe living conditions. Climate vulnerability is particularly severe in coastal cities such as Mumbai, Chennai, and Kolkata, which face risks of flooding and sea-level rise. Water scarcity and inefficient waste recycling add to the pressure. Strengthening urban governance, integrating climate resilience into planning, and expanding sustainable public transport systems are crucial for India to achieve SDG 11.

#### 4.11 SDG 12: Responsible Consumption and Production:

India's economic growth has increased resource demand, leading to challenges in sustainable consumption and production. The government has introduced several policies to promote circular economy practices, waste management, and sustainable lifestyles. The Plastic Waste Management Rules, E-Waste Management Rules, and Extended Producer Responsibility (EPR) framework are designed to hold industries accountable for managing waste. Campaigns like "Lifestyle for Environment (LiFE)" launched by India at COP26 promote sustainable practices at the household and community levels. Progress is visible in renewable energy adoption, energy efficiency programs like the Perform, Achieve, and Trade (PAT) scheme, and the promotion of organic farming under Paramparagat Krishi Vikas Yojana. However, challenges remain. India is the third-largest generator of e-waste globally, yet recycling rates are very low. Food waste continues to be a concern, particularly in urban households and supply chains. Overuse of groundwater and excessive fertilizer consumption strain natural resources. A stronger push for sustainable production technologies, eco-labelling, green procurement, and consumer awareness is needed to advance SDG 12 in India.

#### 4.12 SDG 13: Climate Action

India has made strong international commitments, including achieving net-zero emissions by 2070. Renewable energy projects, afforestation programmes, and initiatives to promote electric mobility have been introduced. However, India's dependence on coal, rapid industrialisation, and rising urban pollution levels make climate action a difficult task. Frequent extreme weather events such as floods, heatwaves, and droughts further complicate the challenge.

**4.13 SDG 14: Life Below Water:** Although India is not an island nation, it has a coastline of over 7,500 km and a large population dependent on marine and coastal resources. Progress under SDG 14 has been modest. The government has launched initiatives such as the Sagarmala Programme, Deep Ocean Mission, and Integrated Coastal Zone Management Project to enhance the maritime economy and protect ecosystems. The



Blue Economy policy framework aims to balance economic activities like shipping, fisheries, and offshore energy with conservation. India has also joined international efforts to combat illegal, unreported, and unregulated (IUU) fishing. Despite these measures, challenges remain significant. Overfishing, coral reef degradation, plastic pollution, and coastal erosion threaten marine biodiversity. Urban and industrial waste discharged into rivers and seas has worsened water pollution in coastal areas. Climate change is also causing rising sea levels and ocean acidification, impacting the livelihoods of fishing communities. Protecting mangroves, improving sewage treatment, and reducing single-use plastics are essential for marine sustainability. While inland states are less directly affected by SDG 14, coastal sustainability is vital for India's food security, economic growth, and ecological balance.

#### 4.14 SDG 15: Life on Land

India is one of the world's 17 "megadiverse" countries, hosting a wide range of ecosystems from forests and wetlands to deserts and mountains. To protect terrestrial ecosystems, India has expanded its network of protected areas, including 104 national parks, 566 wildlife sanctuaries, and 18 biosphere reserves. Flagship species protection programs such as Project Tiger and Project Elephant have contributed to the recovery of key species. The Compensatory Afforestation Fund, Green India Mission, and National Afforestation Programme are aimed at restoring degraded land and enhancing carbon sinks. India is also committed to achieving Land Degradation Neutrality by 2030, with large-scale initiatives to restore 26 million hectares of degraded land. Despite these efforts, challenges remain acute. Rapid deforestation due to infrastructure development, mining, and urbanization continues to threaten biodiversity. India lost significant forest cover between 2001–2020, particularly in the Northeast. Human-wildlife conflicts are rising, especially in areas where expanding agriculture and settlements overlap with forests. Unsustainable use of groundwater, soil degradation, and desertification in states like Rajasthan and Gujarat also threaten food security. Climate change further accelerates biodiversity loss, making ecosystems more fragile. To advance SDG 15, India needs stronger enforcement of environmental regulations, community-led forest management, and promotion of sustainable agriculture. Expanding eco-tourism, incentivizing organic farming, and restoring mangroves and wetlands can enhance both livelihoods and biodiversity. Mainstreaming biodiversity concerns into infrastructure and urban planning is essential. Protecting India's forests and ecosystems is not only vital for ecological balance but also for the livelihoods of millions of people, especially tribal and rural communities.

#### 4.15 SDG 16–17: Peace, Justice, and Partnerships

India has emphasised transparent governance, federal cooperation, and international partnerships for sustainable development. The Voluntary National Review (VNR) 2025

highlights the importance of partnerships with states, local governments, civil society, and the private sector. However, challenges remain in improving institutional efficiency, reducing corruption, and ensuring effective delivery of services at the grassroots level.

#### 5. Challenges

Despite some encouraging progress, India's journey towards achieving the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) by 2030 is marked by numerous challenges. These challenges are both structural and policy-related, and they require urgent attention.

A major challenge is regional disparity in development. States like Kerala, Tamil Nadu, and Himachal Pradesh are closer to achieving many SDG targets, while states such as Bihar, Uttar Pradesh, Madhya Pradesh, and Jharkhand lag far behind in education, health, and poverty reduction. This uneven development creates a serious obstacle for national-level progress, since India cannot achieve the SDGs unless every region moves forward together.

Another critical challenge is poverty and inequality. While India has lifted millions out of poverty in the last two decades, income inequality has widened. Reports by Oxfam (2024) indicate that the richest 10% hold more than 70% of the country's wealth, while a significant section of the population still struggles with basic needs like nutritious food, quality healthcare, and secure housing. This inequality not only weakens social cohesion but also reduces the effectiveness of welfare schemes.

Unemployment and underemployment also remain pressing issues. Even though India's workforce is large, a majority of jobs are informal, lacking job security and social protection. Youth unemployment is a serious problem, as millions of educated young people find it difficult to secure meaningful employment. Without addressing this, SDG 8 (Decent Work and Economic Growth) will remain difficult to achieve.

A particularly alarming challenge is environmental sustainability. India is among the most climate-vulnerable countries, facing rising temperatures, erratic monsoons, and extreme weather events like floods and droughts. Air pollution continues to be one of the leading causes of premature deaths, especially in cities like Delhi, Lucknow, and Kanpur. India's dependence on coal for energy generation makes the transition to renewable energy slow and difficult. Achieving SDG 13 (Climate Action) requires balancing industrial growth with strict environmental regulations, which is politically and economically complex.

Another challenge relates to gender inequality. Even though women's participation in education and the workforce has improved, issues like wage gaps, underrepresentation in leadership positions, and high levels of gender-based violence continue to hinder progress. India's low ranking in the Global Gender Gap Index reflects these persistent issues.

In addition, data gaps and monitoring issues are also serious concerns. Reliable, disaggregated data at the local level is often missing, which makes it difficult to measure progress

accurately. Without strong data systems, policy interventions may not reach the intended groups effectively.

Lastly, the impact of COVID-19 has reversed progress on several goals, especially in health, education, and poverty reduction. Many families fell back into poverty during the pandemic, and school closures widened learning gaps for children, especially in rural areas.

## 6. Future Directions for India

India stands at a crucial point in its journey towards achieving the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). With less than a decade left until the 2030 deadline, it is important to focus on practical strategies and policy directions that can accelerate progress. Future directions for India should combine economic growth with social inclusion and environmental sustainability.

One of the most important steps is to reduce regional disparities. States like Kerala and Himachal Pradesh show that progress is possible with strong governance, investment in human development, and efficient welfare delivery. The central government should encourage knowledge-sharing between states and provide additional financial and technical support to lagging regions like Bihar, Jharkhand, and Uttar Pradesh. This will help ensure balanced progress across the country.

Strengthening poverty alleviation and social protection must remain a priority. Schemes such as PM-KISAN, MGNREGA, and the Public Distribution System should be expanded with better targeting so that benefits reach the poorest households. Social safety nets, especially for vulnerable groups such as migrant workers, women-headed households, and urban poor, must be strengthened to prevent them from falling back into poverty during crises like pandemics or natural disasters.

Another direction is to focus on job creation and skill development. With millions of young people entering the workforce every year, India must generate employment not only in the informal sector but also in industries with long-term potential such as renewable energy, digital technology, and green manufacturing. Skill training programs need to be aligned with emerging sectors like artificial intelligence, electric mobility, and climate-resilient agriculture. This will ensure that the workforce is prepared for future opportunities.

Environmental sustainability and climate action must also be placed at the heart of development. India has already made progress in renewable energy, especially solar and wind, but coal remains a dominant source. The future requires a faster transition to clean energy, energy-efficient technologies, and sustainable urban planning. Afforestation drives, water conservation programs, and strict pollution-control mechanisms should be prioritized. Climate-resilient agriculture practices—such as drip irrigation, crop diversification, and organic farming—can help protect both farmers' livelihoods and ecosystems.

Gender equality and empowerment of women must be strengthened as a cross-cutting theme in all policies. India should promote women's participation in leadership, entrepreneurship, and governance. Programs to reduce gender-based violence, improve access to healthcare, and provide equal

pay for equal work are essential for achieving not just SDG 5 (Gender Equality) but also for improving outcomes in education, health, and economic growth.

Digital governance and data systems are another key future direction. To track SDG progress effectively, India needs better quality, disaggregated data at village, district, and state levels. Expanding digital platforms for service delivery, such as Aadhaar-linked subsidies and online learning, can improve efficiency and reduce corruption. However, digital divides must be addressed so that rural and marginalized communities are not left behind.

Lastly, India's future SDG journey should be based on a whole-of-society approach. Government efforts alone cannot achieve the goals. The private sector must adopt sustainable business practices, universities should promote research and innovation, and civil society organizations must ensure community participation. International cooperation is equally important, as India can benefit from global financial and technological support to meet its climate and development commitments.

## 7. CONCLUSION

India's progress towards the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) demonstrates a combination of achievements and ongoing challenges. Over the last decade, the country has made notable strides in areas such as access to electricity, clean water, sanitation, maternal and child health, and digital infrastructure. Government initiatives like Swachh Bharat Mission, Jal Jeevan Mission, Ayushman Bharat, and MGNREGA have significantly contributed to improving the quality of life for millions of Indians. The SDG India Index 2023–24 also reflects the success of some states in implementing effective policies and achieving measurable outcomes.

However, substantial challenges remain. Regional disparities, persistent poverty, gender inequality, unemployment, and environmental risks continue to hinder India's SDG progress. Climate change, air pollution, and over-reliance on fossil fuels are key barriers to sustainable growth. In addition, data gaps and weak governance in certain regions limit the effectiveness of policy interventions. Achieving inclusive development will require addressing these structural challenges, particularly through targeted social policies and investment in human capital.

Looking forward, India must adopt a multi-pronged and inclusive strategy. Strengthening social protection, promoting women's empowerment, improving access to quality education and healthcare, and accelerating the transition to renewable energy are essential. Effective local governance, better data systems, public-private partnerships, and community engagement will be critical to ensure that development reaches all sections of society. India's commitment to SDGs must balance economic growth with environmental sustainability and social equity.

In summary, India has made measurable progress towards the SDGs, yet the road ahead is challenging. By focusing on inclusive growth, gender equality, climate action, and strong governance, India can not only meet its 2030 SDG targets but

also emerge as a global example of sustainable development in a large and diverse developing country. Achieving the SDGs in India will require persistent effort, coordinated action across sectors, and a strong vision for equitable and sustainable development.

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