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Sustainable Development Goals: India's Policy and Politics

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RGICS issue brief

Sustainable Development Goals: India's Policy and Politics

The Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) which are due to be signed in September 2015 inaugurate the onset of a new and potentially more ambitious policy framework in the international development discourse. Building on the broad success of the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) which expire in 2015, the SDGs were negotiated at the United Nations Conference on Sustainable Development (UNCSD), also referred to as the Rio +20, held in Rio de Janeiro in 2012, and involving large participation of the private sector, civil society actors and governments. Resulting in an outcome document appropriately titled the 'The Future We Want'[1], the SDGs focus on international developmental outcomes hinging on three pillars viz. economic, social and environmental [2]. They are integrated and indivisible and balance the three dimensions of sustainable development: the economic, social and environmental.

They have identified five areas as being "of critical importance for humanity and the planet"[3] over the next 15 years viz. **people, planet, prosperity, peace and partnership.** These five goal encompass ending poverty and hunger, ensuring human dignity, sustainable consumption and production to tackle climate change and protect the environment, inclusive prosperity and peace for all, and global partnership for sustainable development bridging the divide between the developed and developing countries.

These broad areas are encapsulated within **17 Goals and 169 targets**, which will come into effect from January 2016. Some of the key goals include[4]:

- Eradicating poverty in all its forms, including extreme poverty, and end hunger.
- Inclusive education at all levels.
- Universal health coverage and access to quality healthcare.
- Sustainable economic growth.
- Sustainable production and consumption.
- Remove harmful unilateral trade-related action by countries, not in keeping with international law.

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[1] United Nations n.d.
[2] Bakshi and Kumar 2013.
[3] United Nations 2015.
[4] Ibid.

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- Dealing with climate change through the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change.

- Protecting the commons and biodiversity.

- Regulating the fallouts of urban development.

- Ensuring international peace and security in conformity with international law.

- Protecting the dignity and well-being of international migrants.

The success of these goals will largely depend on the extent to which we have been able to learn lessons from more than a decade of MDGs, at both the global and national levels.

A political history:

Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) were signed in 2000 after the failures of the exclusion of social development from economic goals became evident. The politics that precedes their history has been marked by a constant contestation of a neo-liberal global agenda of the International Monetary Fund (IMF) and the World Bank[5]. They subscribed to cutting of social spending by developing countries as condition for providing development aid. The disastrous results which such a policy produced in Africa, Asia and Latin America[6] caused the international policy-makers to re-define their political priorities.

Highlighting the need of inclusion and participation cutting across boundaries of states and populations[7], the MDGs were a set of eight core goals relating to poverty, education, gender equity, child mortality, maternal health, health, environmental sustainability and global partnership for development.
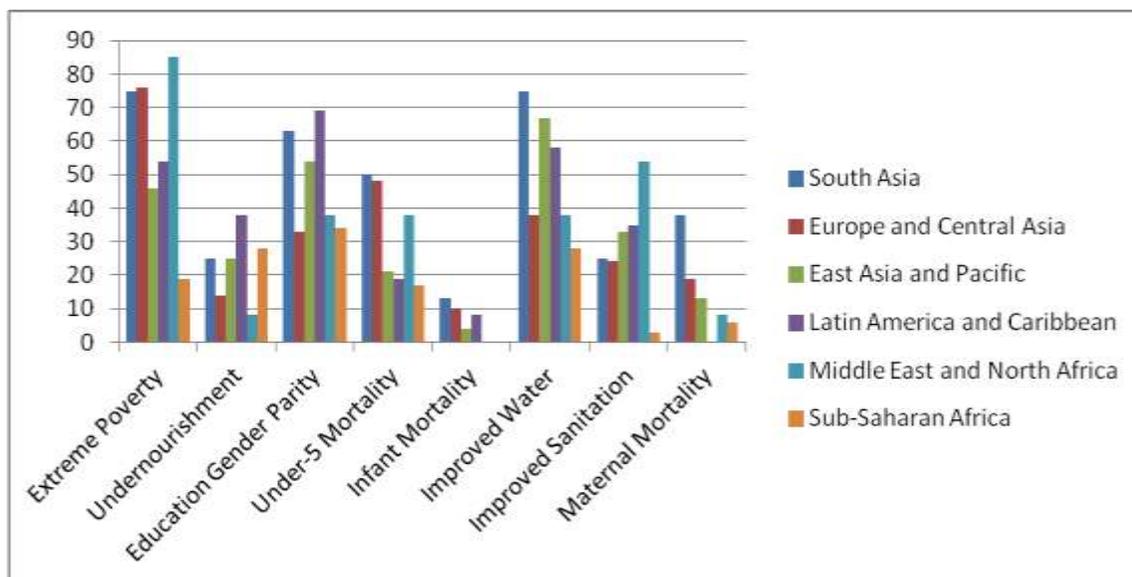
After more than 15 years of MDGs, it is being argued that they have set a successful foundation for adopting the SDGs. However, this is not entirely true. The success of MDGs has been limited to some areas only, as the graph below shows:

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[5] Hattori 2013.
[6] McArthur 2013.
[7] Kaul, Grunberg and Stern 1999.

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Source: Information taken from the World Bank Data. Graph compiled by the author.

The data above shows that while the targets for the reduction in extreme poverty, education gender parity, access to water and, to a lesser extent, improved sanitation, have largely been met by various regions of the world to varying degrees, the same cannot be said of critical social indicators like access to food and mortality rates especially for infants.

Implementing the SDGs: A leap forward?

As seen previously, the development track record highlights two political factors that potentially come into play:

First, it is the demand for specific governmental goals that ultimately drives the outcomes of development policy priorities and shapes the manner in which development discourses are structured at the national level.
Second, commitment to the realization of international obligations, in order to claim legitimacy and influence in international policy issue-areas, also structures the domestic political priorities of states vis-a-vis the international development discourse.

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In the context of the track record and analysis of the MDGs, do the Sustainable Development Goals represent substantial progress? The SDGs, forming the heart of the UN's Post-2015 Development Agenda, seek to build upon the "existing international commitments in the economic, social and environmental fields"[8] Negotiated by the Open Working Group (OWG) mandated by the United Nations General Assembly (UNGA) to chart a post-MDG development agenda, the SDGs were framed by the UN in one of the largest public consultation processes beyond the boundaries of the international system, involving 'global conversations', door-to-door campaigns and launching of the 'My World survey' to get the public feedback[9]. This is in sharp contrast to the process by which the MDGs were negotiated – a top-down process conducted at the intergovernmental and institutional levels without a substantive degree of public mobilization[10]. In this sense, the SDGs represent a leap forward by attempting to span a comprehensive public outreach.

At the same time, the extent to which the SDGs mark progress over the earlier developmental context needs to be analysed through the potential they offer for the type of outcomes they may produce in future:

- _Potential for realization_: In sharp contrast to the MDGs which consisted of 8 goals and 18 targets, the SDGs consist of 17 goals and 169 targets. The scale of the task not only puts a question mark on the difficulty of the political will needed to be summoned to achieve the targets, but also makes the economics of it, all the more ambiguous. Many economists from the organization, **Copenhagen Consensus, have expressed scepticism at the feasibility of several of the SDGs**. The big question that they raise is around the effective utilisation of the 2.5 trillion USD international assistance and and its optimal utilisation for the achievement of SDG targets[11]. Based on economic analysis in a major work on the SDGs[12], it has emerged that the benefits accrued for every dollar spent would favour certain outcomes more than others.

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[8] United Nations n.d.
[9] Dasgupta 2015.
[10] Bakshi and Kumar 2013.
[11] The Economist 2015.
[12] Lomborg 2014.

The leading benefits of investing in the SDGs would accrue in the area of trade liberalization viz. breaking the deadlock at the World Trade Organization by the full implementation of the Doha round of talks. There are also substantive benefits per dollar to be accrued in the targets pertaining to universal contraception, education, curbing illicit financial flows, health, allowing more migration, and access to food and nutrition. However, the goals that would suffer the most under this cost-benefit analysis would be detrimental to greater investment allocation in the areas of combating poverty, climate change, increased skilled worker migration, phasing out of fossil fuels subsidies, combating air pollution and ensuring access to water and sanitation. For instance, the cost-benefit analysis as given below estimates that ending extreme poverty through money transfers would return the benefit of only 5 USD for every dollar spent –this is analysed as a 'good' estimate by the report (refer to Figure 2), but is dismal in relation with other targets like trade liberalization. Even worse, cutting down outdoor air pollution yields the 'poor' benefit of only 0.3 USD for every dollar spent.

- *Prioritizing outcomes*: Given the implications of the cost-benefit analysis, it is essential that countries like India should proceed cautiously in prioritising their developmental imperatives under the SDG agenda. Countries cannot afford to ignore even the supposedly undervalued goods like combating climate change, cutting outdoor air pollution, eliminating open defecation (which in the cost-benefit analysis yields 6 USD for every dollar spent), climate change adaptation (which yields only 2 USD for every dollar spent) and providing basic sanitation (which only yields 3 USD benefit for every dollar spent).

Even if it is argued that two disparate targets like ending extreme poverty by money transfers yielding a benefit of 5 USD per dollar spent cannot be compared to trade liberalization yielding a benefit of more than 3000 USD per dollar spent, and that the benefits of this poverty reduction target can actually be rated 'good' in terms of returns by not viewing it through a cross-sector comparative approach, there is a deeper problem of politics. Even if we abandon the cross-sector comparative approach and stress the benefits of eradication of extreme poverty autonomously, it will very likely legitimate national policy

priorities that favour outcomes supported by the cost-benefit results rather than environmental and social outcomes.

It is, therefore, essential that, if governments need to work for the welfare of society and environment besides their economic imperatives, they should apply the cost-benefit approach in a qualified and conditional manner, without necessarily prioritizing the SDGs in accordance with the cost-benefit methodology.

- *Ignoring the neo-liberal malaise*: Another weakness of the current UN policy lies in that it advocates superficial solutions to deep-rooted issues. In a context where we are overshooting[13] the earth's capacity by 50% every year, solutions like resource efficiency and sustainable business practices really amounts to implicitly supporting neo-liberal extraction and accumulation by the corporates. This will have adverse effects in many areas:

  - Poverty-eradication: Growth by accumulation has not helped in poverty reduction[14] –between 1999 and 2008, the poorest 60% of world's population received only 5% of the income generated through global GDP growth. Moreover, the $1.25 per day poverty line[15] of World Bank doesn't account for developing country realities. In India, even children living just above this poverty line have a 60% chance of being malnourished. So even if we accept the current poverty line and achieve our target by 2030, it will be at the cost of excluding nearly half the humanity.

  - Food scarcity: Neo-liberalization of food commodity markets has encouraged financial speculation in these markets since 2007, pushing millions into hunger. Yet the SDGs only call for their better regulation instead of reform or overhaul.

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[13] Hickel 2015.
[14] Ibid.
[15] Ibid.

> ➤ <u>Weak financial market regulation</u>: Despite the fact that the Global Financial Crisis of 2008 still continues, the SDGs do not call for strict regulation of banks. They do not address issues like tax evasion and debt restructuring which drain, respectively, nearly 1.7 trillion USD and 700 billion USD each year.

Implementing SDGs in India:

Given the debate on the global state of play on the SDGs, it is imperative to assess the prospects of implementing and prioritizing the SDGs in the Indian context. Can the cost-benefit analysis apply fruitfully to India? Estimates by economists have revealed that there are '19 best targets' among the SDGs that will fruitfully bring a benefit of more than 15 rupees for every rupee spent.
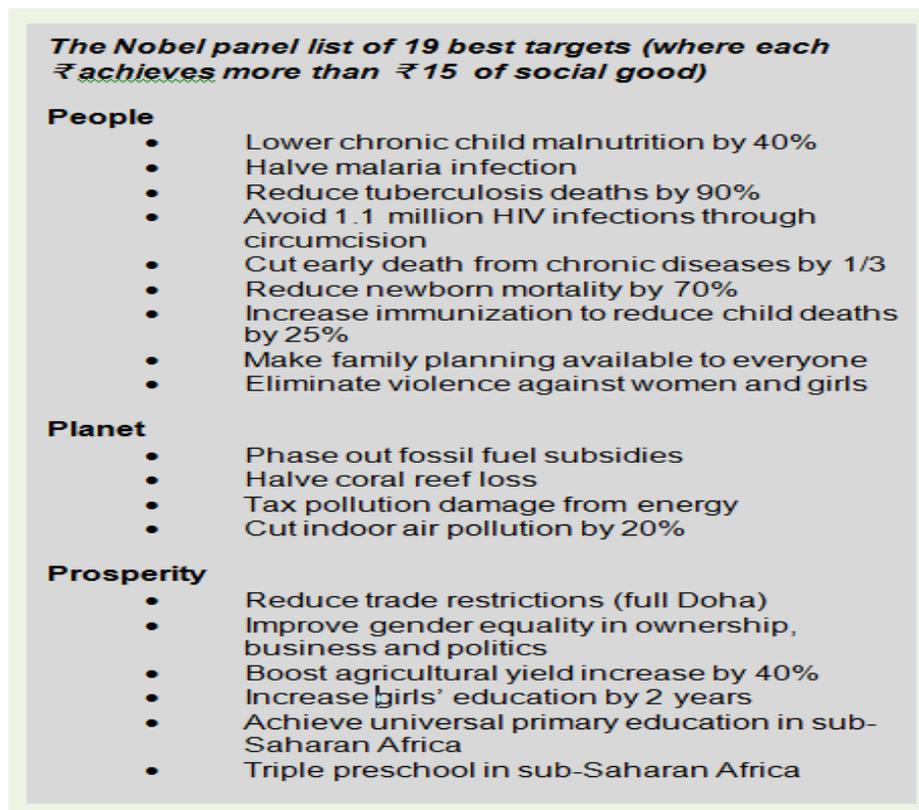
The Nobel panel list of 19 best targets (where each ₹ achieves more than ₹15 of social good)

People
- Lower chronic child malnutrition by 40%
- Halve malaria infection
- Reduce tuberculosis deaths by 90%
- Avoid 1.1 million HIV infections through circumcision
- Cut early death from chronic diseases by 1/3
- Reduce newborn mortality by 70%
- Increase immunization to reduce child deaths by 25%
- Make family planning available to everyone
- Eliminate violence against women and girls

Planet
- Phase out fossil fuel subsidies
- Halve coral reef loss
- Tax pollution damage from energy
- Cut indoor air pollution by 20%

Prosperity
- Reduce trade restrictions (full Doha)
- Improve gender equality in ownership, business and politics
- Boost agricultural yield increase by 40%
- Increase girls' education by 2 years
- Achieve universal primary education in sub-Saharan Africa
- Triple preschool in sub-Saharan Africa

Figure 1; Source: Hindustan Times.[16]

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[16] B. Lomborg 2015.

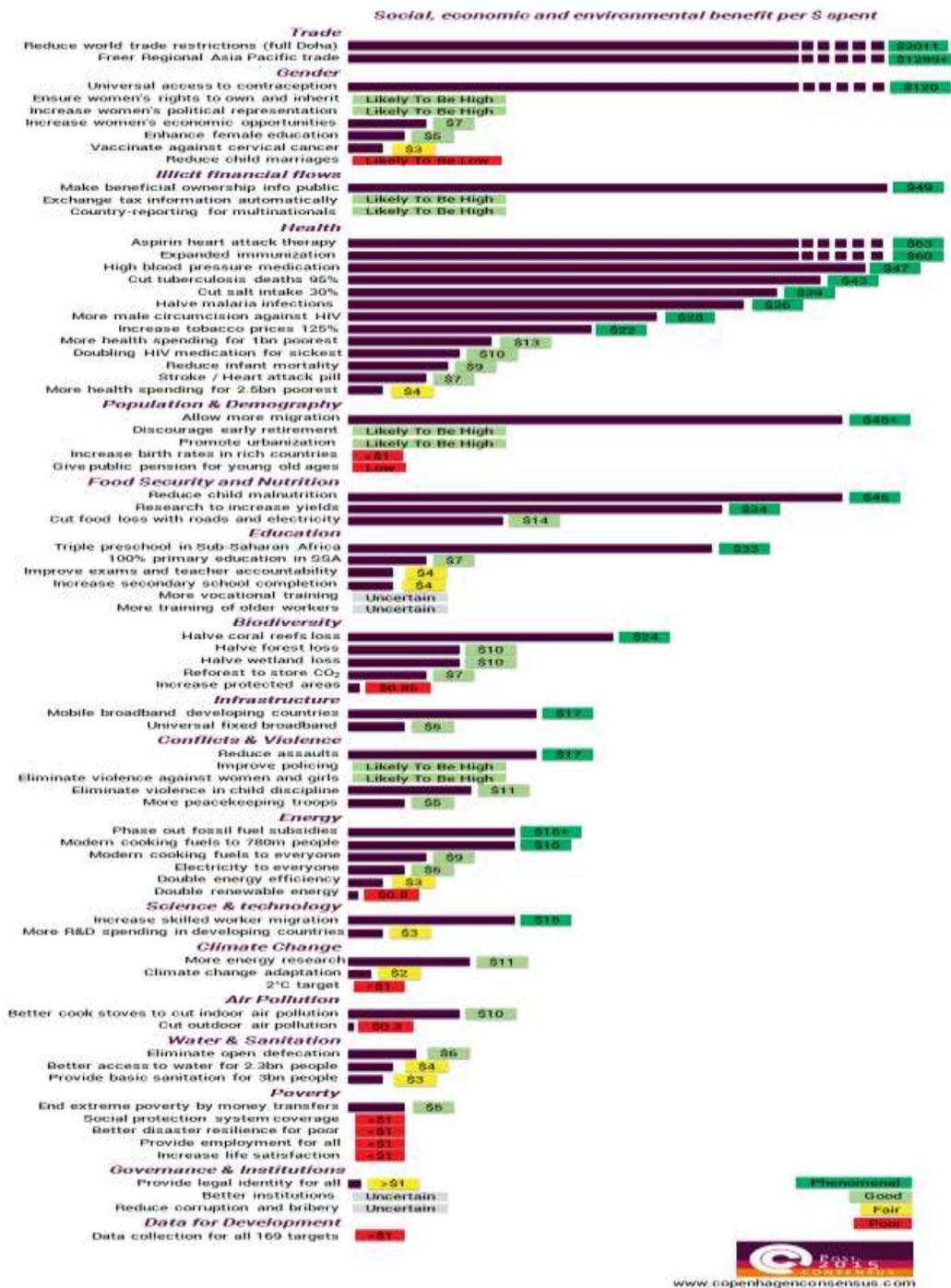## Sustainable Development Goals: India's Policy and Politics

Figure 2; Source: Copenhagen Consensus Centre.

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It is important to analyze the question of resources for implementation of the SDGs in the Indian context as, in the case of the SDGs agenda, "[f]inancing will be the lynchpin for its success."[17]

It is significant that while many of these targets which give a good 'return on investment' in the Indian context are commendable, there might be the kind of political and developmental loopholes raised above. For instance, in the case of benefits for the planet, if we analyse it from the point of view of tackling climate change, it is noticeable that economists have recommended the phasing out of fossil fuel subsidies, cutting down of indoor air pollution and investment in research and development (refer to Figures 1 and 2). All these alternatives will supposedly yield better return on money invested rather than investing in renewable sources of energy to combat global warming[18]. This is a problematic proposition on two counts:

First, these measures are even more incremental in terms of the dangerous threshold the humanity has set for itself in climate change than measures like graded investment in green capital, like renewable energy, over a period of time. It does not match up to the urgency of the climate change debate. This is being recognized by all the countries including India, which has started investing heavily in solar energy.

Second, since sustainability forms the obvious essence of the SDGs, it is not sufficient – and is also contradictory – to compromise that imperative simply because the benefits might not cover the initial costs of investment.

The politics of India's SDGs policy:

India has articulated a clear, albeit debatable, policy position, articulating commitments and obstructions, on the Sustainable Development Goals. It has been participating in the meetings of the Open Working Group (OWG) established by the United Nations General Assembly (UNGA)[19] and Inter-Governmental Committee of Experts

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[17] Dasgupta 2015.
[18] Dasgupta 2015.
[19] Lok Sabha 2015.

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on Sustainable Development Financing with a "view to protecting our interests in these negotiations"[20]. While India had initially not accepted the original framework by insisting on specific targets only for developed countries during the major part of the three-year negotiations within which SDGs were conceptualized, by arguing that it would prefer to have more 'non-intrusive' targets, it has now accepted the consensus on the SDGs after its concerns were incorporated[21]. Accepting the Prime Minister's initiatives such as 'Beti Bachao Beti Padhao', smart cities, Clean Indian mission and renewable energy with a focus on climate change as a developmental-economic issue, has come a long way in securing India's endorsement of the Post-2015 Development Agenda[22].

The Indian position[23] on the SDGs can be analysed through three themes:

- _Nature of development priorities_: The development priorities for India are located within the larger framework of the North-South development divide. From the perspective of Indian policy position, such a divide definitely exists and negotiations should be sensitive to it. As India stated clearly during the SDGs negotiations in February 2015, "[t]his dichotomy is being wilfully perpetuated even today, through unequal international governance structures which protect the privileged position of some over others."[24] Thus, India's SDG priorities emphasize overarching focus on eradication of poverty and hunger[25]; focus on economic goals emphasizing economic growth, full employment, creation of infrastructure, and industrialization; inclusion of the goal of Sustainable Consumption Patterns achieved with great difficulty[26].

  It is significant that social, and particularly environmental issues, are conspicuously missing from these priorities. This has come out clearly in the Indian stand during the intergovernmental negotiations on the SDGs viz. "[w]e would in fact prefer stronger language attesting to the importance of ensuring robust

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[20] Rajya Sabha 2014.
[21] Chauhan 2015.
[22] Ibid.
[23] United Nations 2015.
[24] United Nations 2015.
[25] Emphasis on eradication of poverty and hunger is considered the 'single biggest takeaway' for India from the SDG negotiations (Dasgupta 2015).
[26] Dasgupta 2015.

and sustained economic growth in developing countries as the first and necessary pre-condition for achieving this agenda."[27]

Thus, **emphasis on economic growth forms the core of India's policy vis-a-vis the SDGs**. It, in fact, anchors the rest of the goals in the social and ecological domains. **Such a position is unfortunate, since, it is based on an implicit assumption that realization of one set of targets would be preferred over another, equally important, set.** It is also ironical, since, the SDGs are premised on a commitment to the goals of sustainability, and, in that sense, are closely linked to environmental and natural resource governance[28], which have been mainstreamed across all the SDGs, as opposed to the MDGs which were based more on social pillars[29]. To, therefore, consider marginalizing this domain would defeat the entire purpose of signing the SDGs, making it nothing more than lip service in international forums.

- _Nature of discharge of negotiated commitments_: The principle of Common But Differentiated Responsibilities (CBDRs) was accepted, through consensus, by the international community in July 2014[30]. Here India took a clear stand supporting the incorporation of the principle of Common But Differentiated Responsibilities (CBDRs) in the discharge of the commitments in SDGs[31]. This was a critical policy issue for India since the core of sustainability in the SDGs is closely linked with the larger policy frame of environmental governance[32] – a domain in which India has historically emphasized the principle of CBDRs on the ground of upholding the principles of equity and justice.

However, even now, after more than two decades, these principles are not free from political contestations, as revealed during the recent intergovernmental negotiations on the SDGs. India's insistence –along with the rest of the developing countries – that the principles of differentiation and equity be retained still continues to be met by considerable resistance from the developed countries, who

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[27] United Nations 2015.
[28] United Nations Environment Programme 2015.
[29] United Nations 2015.
[30] United Nations 2015.
[31] Rajya Sabha 2014.
[32] United Nations Environment Programme 2015.

argue that such a principle is tantamount to 'inaction' on the part of the developing countries[33]. Instead, the developed countries would prefer to emphasize the idea of 'shared responsibility' in the Means of Implementation (MOI) of the SDGs, rather than the principle of CBDRs. For, the principle of shared responsibility places the primary onus of arranging for the means of implementation on both the developed and the developing countries.

This has been contested by India. India's position is affirmed clearly in the recent SDGs intergovernmental debates, where the Indian representative strongly maintained that, "We also support the G-77 in calling for the deletion of the word 'shared responsibility'...this notion is nothing but mere rhetoric and its proponents have no intention of walking the talk."[34] The Indian policy position also contested, in the same vein, the principle of having the 'responsibility of all states' in discussions of climate change mitigation –a significant policy position that reflects India's refusal to have the climate policy issue removed from the multilateral agenda which is characterised by the principle of differentiated responsibilities.

In line with this position of differentiated responsibilities, India insisted on prioritization of the closely related imperative of 'universal access' with respect to critical issues like removal of poverty and access to energy. For instance, India has insisted on the removal of the reference to 'extreme poverty' in the Preamble and Declaration to the SDGs[35] – the rationale being that the term 'extreme' in speaking about poverty would, quantitatively, refer only to poverty in Least developed and developing countries, thereby masking the many injustices of simply 'poverty' prevailing in the developed countries, and limiting the 'universality' of the agenda.

- _Nature of implementation mechanisms agreed upon_: Here India has a clear position, which is in line with its historical position, wherein it expects the developed countries to contribute, in the form of aid and global public goods additionality, to help the developing countries in the national implementation of

[33] United Nations 2015.
[34] Ibid.
[35] United Nations 2015.

the development goals. This position comes out clearly in the Indian policy position insisting upon the centrality of the Goal Number 17 viz. 'Strengthen the means of implementation and revitalize the global partnership for sustainable development'.

This goal entails two processes, which are vital to the preservation of India's global interests in the field of sustainability:

> ➢ "By 2020, enhance capacity building support to developing countries, including for LDCs and SIDS, to increase significantly the availability of high-quality, timely and reliable data disaggregated by income, gender, race, age, ethnicity, migratory status, disability, geographic location and other characteristics relevant in national contexts.

> ➢ By 2030, build on existing initiatives to develop measurements of progress on sustainable development that complement GDP, and support statistical capacity building in developing countries."[36]

It is clear why goal number 17 forms a crucial part of India's vision on the SDGs. The targets contained herein pertain primarily to the Means of Implementation (MOI) of the rest of the SDGs, thereby pinning a substantive responsibility on the developed countries to aid the developing countries in meeting the rest of the SDG targets. This is in keeping with India's overall policy approach to sustainable development viz. common but differentiated responsibility and the principle of equity[37]. This was reiterated by India in its latest representation at the 8th Session of Intergovernmental Negotiations on Post-2015 Development Agenda, on 29th July, 2015. Here India[38] affirmed its position that:

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[36] Kapto 2014.
[37] Rajya Sabha 2014.
[38] United Nations 2015.

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➤ The Third International Financing for Development (FfD) conference held at Addis Ababa this year forms a key part of negotiating the Means of Implementation in the SDGs[39]. The FfD process, evolved at the Monterrey Consensus of 2002, forms a core part of the new international development aid agenda, which incorporates the importance of international aid as a global public good. While it is rife with several contentions[40], the FfD process is favoured by developing countries like India.

➤ The Means of Implementation and Global Partnership (GP) should be contained along with the rest of SDGs rather than independently. This coheres is in line with India's support of including Goal Number 17 as an SDG.

➤ Opposition to the EU proposals to 'renegotiate' a 'new' Global Partnership. India stuck to its position that the existing MOI/GP under the FfD outcome and the SDGs Development Agenda should be maintained. It also maintained its critical argument that the SDGs MOI and the FfD cannot be collated together under the Global Partnership, even though the two complement each other. This is a key point for India, since the FfD outcome speaks to a larger process of international development assistance which, although it includes the SDGs, is not circumscribed or constrained by the substance of the latter. That is why India is against any kind of renegotiation of the FfD outcome under the guise of renegotiating a 'new' Global Partnership under the SDGs agenda by the developed countries.

Thus, for India, there are two broad policy priorities that elucidate its current position on the SDGs:

• Political will to adopt the SDGs as a central feature of the new Post-2015 Development Agenda.

• Transfer of financial and technical assistance to the developing countries.

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[39] The FfD repeatedly talks about the importance of the inter-linkages between the FfD process supporting 'enhanced financial and technological support' to the developing countries and the Post-2015 Development Agenda through which the SDGs will be negotiated (United Nations 2015).
[40] The debates on FfD in the global public goods agenda have been extensively discussed by (Carbone 2007).

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However, in order to have a stronger position on the SDGs, India needs to go beyond its current stand and overcome the contradictions that may potentially undermine its own international and domestic legitimacy and harm the domestic implementation of the SDGs.

In this context, the following salient arguments need to be pushed forth.

Way Forward:

- *Responsibility structure*: There are two aspects that are crucial here:

  First, the SDGs –in continuity with the normative structure of the MDGs – need to be implemented through the active participation of various public, private and non-profit actors[41].

  Since SDGs are voluntary commitments, the concept of responsibility cannot be concretised through an imposition of legal obligations on nation-states, since that would be opposed on the grounds of interference in sovereignty. However, what the government can be held accountable to is the extent to which it promotes or obstructs the role of civil society, which is potentially the major driver of bringing social change through mobilization of the SDGs.

  Second, India also should not shy away from being held accountable at the international level. During the SDGs negotiations, India took the unfortunate stand that, "We suggest deleting the term 'mutual accountability'"[42], from the 'follow-up and review' process of the SDGs. Instead, India insisted that follow-up and review amounts to two processes viz. implementation and facilitation –both of which are meant to ensure that developing countries reach their targets[43]. This removal of accountability is unfortunate. Insisting on mutual accountability does not mean we should condone the present normative structure of accountability, within which developed countries might attempt to impose their political agenda on the developing countries in the name of accountability. Instead, just like responsibility for implementation is 'common but differentiated', accountability too should be assessed vis-a-vis national priorities, rather than being imposed by the developed countries. Thus, instead of insisting that 'mutual

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[41] McArthur 2013.
[42] United Nations 2015.
[43] United Nations 2015.

accountability' be deleted altogether, India needs to insist on the principle of differentiated accountability.

- *Stronger emphasis on the principle of equity*: In order to translate its international policy commitments into domestic policy action, India not only needs to sustain its consistent emphasis on the principle of equity in the international negotiations, but also needs to back up this rhetoric through substantive international action. Key international institutions, responsible for the operationalization of resources for implementation of development programmes, continue to be full of deep inequalities in representation. "Bodies of activities engaged in operational activities for development is almost 25% as compared to their share in UN membership of 15%."[44] This reflects the kind of inequality that paralyses or worse, politicises action for development. Lack of representation here translates into lack of political power and inability to streamline the principles agreed upon at the UN forums into actual policies and programmes. Unless India concentrates on correcting this fundamental imbalance of power, all the resources assigned to domestic development programmes, from international funding sources, would follow a polarized political utilization, thus, coming to no good.

- *Avoid self-defeating and contradictory positions*: An unfortunate feature of India's policy position on the SDGs is there are contradictions between principles and implementation strategies. While in matter of principles, it emphasizes the overarching aim that economic growth should be given priority throughout all the SDGs, in practical terms, this has the potential to jeopardize India's interests in the field of development, particularly in issues like energy access. Universal energy access is not a purely economic aim, but a developmental one –and one that particularly hinges on India's receiving monetary and technological aid from developed countries. If India continues to insist that the economic pillar of SDGs be mainstreamed as a 'pre-condition' to negotiating others, then its argument on ensuring universal energy access through the differentiated responsibilities of the developed countries becomes considerably weakened.

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[44] United Nations 2015.

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In this context, another major contradiction in the Indian policy stand comes from its ambiguous approach towards progress and education of children. On the one hand, India is being lauded at major United Nations forums for substantively progressing in terms of achieving the goal of 'Education for All', where, according to a UNESCO report, since 2000, India has reduced it's out of school children by nearly 90% and Universal Primary Education has been achieved[45]. However, all this years of progress will come to naught by a contradictory child labour policy being proposed by the current government, where the government plans to amend the Child Labour Act of 1986 in order to allow children below the age of 14 to work in households or 'non-hazardous' family enterprises, including fields, forests and home-based work after school hours or during vacation.[46] This contradictory stand will hit children from low-income households and poor educational backgrounds the most viz. the Dalits, OBCs, Muslims and girls, besides being contradictory to the government's Beti Bachao Andolan.[47] It will also obstruct the government aim of 'Education for All' by going against the right to elementary education under the Right to Education Act.

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[45] UNESCO 2015.
[46] Chauhan, Hindustan Times 2015.
[47] Hindustan Times 2015.

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