



Sustainable Urban Development Goals in India: Issues and Challenges

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Abstract: India has been consistently making efforts to achieve Sustainable Development Goal(SDG) through various programmes, it is imperative for the cities to play an important role in localizing SDG. Indian cities are plagued by overcrowding, pollution, climate change, food insecurity and urban sprawl, which are the manifestations of messy and haphazard urbanization. Given the above context, this background paper attempts to understand a) how the goals of SDG are being operationalised in India, b) the current status of the different targets of SDG in India, c) the challenges to achieve these targets and d) the way forward. Since urban development in India is a state subject, achieving the targets under SDG depends on proper implementation and monitoring of programmes by city governments and state agencies. The progress made towards SDG in the country has been moderate. Cities in India face diverse challenges which are slowing the pace of achievement of SDG. The majorities of these challenges are structural and need interventions from the state governments. The paper goes into deep to analyze the achievement of SDG; a bottom-up approach is required along with a robust SDG localization process involving local governments.

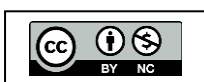
Keywords: SDG, Development, Urban India.

I. INTRODUCTION

Cities represent the future of global living. The world's population reached 8 billion on 2022 over half living in urban areas. This figure is only expected to rise, with 70 per cent of people expected to live in cities by 2050. Approximately 1.1 billion people currently live in slums or slum-like conditions in cities, with 2 billion more expected in the next 30 years. However many of these cities are not ready for this rapid urbanization, and it outpaces the development of housing, infrastructure and services, which led to a rise in slums or slum-like conditions. Urban sprawl, air pollution and limited open public spaces persist in cities. Good progress has been made since the implementation of the SDGs in 2015, and now the number of countries with national and local disaster risk reduction strategies has doubled. But issues still remain and in 2022, only half of the urban population had convenient access to public transport. Sustainable development cannot be achieved without significantly transforming the way urban spaces are built and managed.

II. SUSTAINABLE URBAN DEVELOPMENT: INDIAN CONTEXT

India, the second most populous country in the world, accounts for 11 per cent of the total global urban population housing 461 million people in cities and towns in 2018 (UNDESA, 2019). In 2011, there were 7,933 cities and towns in India comprising 4,041 statutory cities/towns recognized by state





governments and 3,892 census towns which met the census criteria of ‘urban’, but governed by rural panchayats (Census, 2011). These figures are significant both because of their demographic weight and the dynamics of urbanization (Kundu, 2014). The sheer size of urban population poses several challenges to civic infrastructure and public services. The high shares of urban population coupled with low investments in urban development have resulted in a poor level of urban infrastructure in the country.

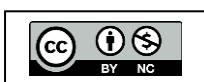
Despite being an early achiever in several Millennium Development Goals (MDGs), India is still struggling to achieve progress in provisioning of water and sanitation, particularly in small and medium size cities and towns. Cities are also plagued by congestion, pollution, climate change, food insecurity and urban sprawls, commonly the manifestations of messy and haphazard urbanization. In the last two decades, the importance of sustainable urbanization has been globally recognized through several globally agreed agendas like the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) in 2000 and the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) in 2015. Drawing lessons from the shortcomings and limited success of the MDGs in addressing urban challenges, the United Nations adopted a specific Goal to “make cities and human settlements inclusive, safe, resilient and sustainable” which includes 11 targets.

Each of these targets has globally standardized indicators. The adoption of a standalone SDG for sustainable urbanization is a result of a successful campaign by UN-Habitat, Cities Alliance and Local Governments for Sustainability, among other stakeholders. In India, the commitment towards the SDGs is reflected in the importance given to inclusivity in the agenda of national development. The Ministry of Housing and Urban Affairs (MoHUA) is mapping its programmatic interventions like the Smart City Mission, Atal Mission for Rejuvenation and Urban Transformation (AMRUT), Clean India Mission (SBM Urban), Housing for All (Urban) and National Urban Livelihood Mission (NULM), etc. with SDG. These programmes, if achieved successfully, would help Indian cities to achieve SDG. Given the above context, this background paper attempts to understand a) how SDG is being operationalised in India, b) the current status of the different targets of SDG in India, c) the challenges to achieve these targets and d) the way forward.

III. INSTITUTIONAL ARCHITECTURE FOR SDG

India has recognized that the SDG framework is essential for addressing the challenges of sustainable development, which is only possible through collaborative actions and building consensus among different stakeholders. The NITI Aayog (National Institution for Transforming India), a policy think tank of the government, has been designated for coordination and monitoring of the SDGs. It has mapped ministries responsible for achieving the targets under different SDGs including SDG and the programmes run by these ministries to achieve the targets.

The Ministry of Housing and Urban Affairs is linking existing urban development programmes and Missions to achieve SDG targets. Since urban development in India is a state subject, the state government notifies the urban local bodies and formulates legislations related to urban. Therefore, achieving the targets under SDG depends on proper implementation and monitoring of programmes by city governments and parastatal agencies, special purpose vehicles and other departments at the state and city levels.



The state and union territories have identified and tasked nodal departments for planning, financing and implementation of SDGs. They have formed working groups for each SDG and high-level committees have been established by several states to provide guidance and put in place mechanisms to achieve SDGs such as the creation of professional units in each nodal department to prepare the progress report, organise capacity building programmes and provide required inputs.

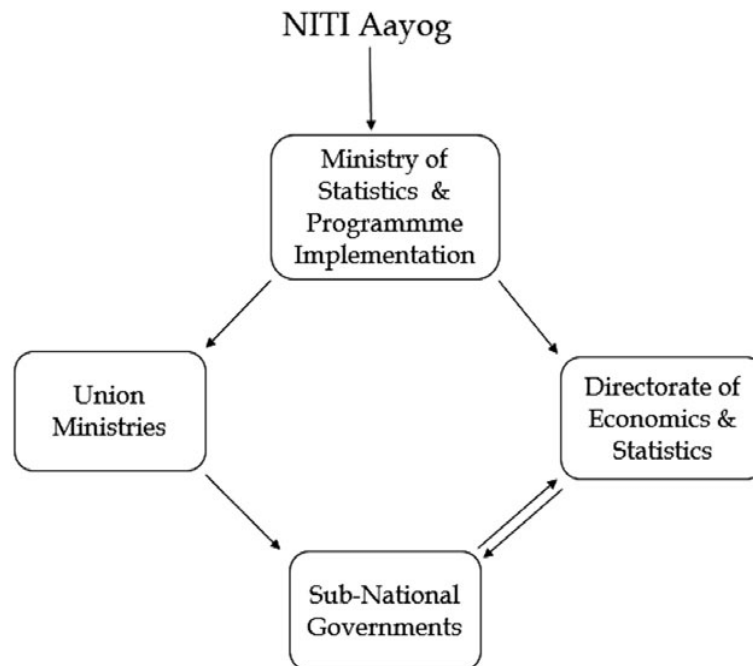


Figure 1: Institutional Structure of SDG in India

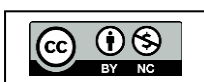
Some states have also involved district level institutions to implement and monitor the progress of SDGs at the local level. Recently, a framework has been developed for cities to leverage SDG for addressing several other interlinked SDGs.

IV. CHALLENGES TO ACHIEVE SDG

Cities in India face diverse challenges which are slowing down the pace of achievement of the SDGs, particularly SDG. The majorities of these challenges are structural and need interventions from the state governments. Some of the major challenges common to all states are the following:

1. Limited Efforts to localize SDGs

Localizing SDG is the process of implementing SDG by taking into account cities/towns specific contexts from the setting of goals and targets, determining the means of implementation and using indicators to measure and monitor progress. In other words, localization relates to a bottom-up approach within an urban development policy framework. However, preliminary assessment indicates that implementing and monitoring SDG at the lowest spatial unit has been a major roadblock.





2. Weak Governance

Structure of Indian Cities It is now three decades since India has recognized cities as the third tier of government through its 74th Constitutional Amendment Act (CAA), 1992. Through this Act, civic responsibilities were to be transferred from state governments to city governments. However, several states have been reluctant to transfer funds, functions and functionaries to cities. Consequently, local governments especially in medium and small size cities are weak, ineffective and unable to function as democratic units of self-governance. Moreover, Indian cities have ceremonial mayors with brief tenures.

The mayors also do not have power to design and implement any project. The city officials do not have adequate capacities to address the emerging challenges of urban planning and management in a rapidly evolving urban scenario. There is a mandate under the 74th CAA to establish Ward Development Committees (WDCs) to promote citizen participation in urban governance. However, the WDCs have not been constituted in many cities or are non-functional. The emergence of powerful Residents' Welfare Associations (RWAs) in big cities as parallel agencies of governance have further diluted the scope and functions of WDCs and institutionalized elite capture of urban governance.

3. Multiplicity of Governance Structure

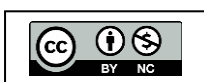
Indian cities are governed by multiple agencies for provision and management of civic functions. The parallel functioning of parastatal bodies such as development authorities, housing boards, water supply and sewerage boards, etc. has further reduced the power of Urban Local Bodies (ULBs). These parastatals create overlapping jurisdictions and fragmentation of responsibilities which often work in silos. The lack of coordination between ULBs and parastatal bodies leads to unclear lines of accountability.

4. Weak Financial Condition of ULBs

The execution of the policies and programmes to achieve SDG targets in the next decade depends on the mobilization of financial resources. Importantly, Indian cities, which are the least empowered financially, suffer from an absence of dedicated funds/budgets for localising SDGs. The Municipal Corporations' own revenues in India constitute only 0.23 per cent of the GDP in 2017-18, much less compared to other emerging economies such as Brazil, Poland and South Africa. Weak administration and strong political interests limit the extent to which ULBs can tap into the tax base and enforce tax compliance. In addition, the ULBs lack financial autonomy to introduce new taxes and user charges.

5. Lack of Robust and Timely Data at Granular Level

Regular availability of critical datasets is essential for informed decision making and monitoring of SDG. Most of the official data sources provide information at the state level, making city, and ward or neighborhood level analysis difficult. Data on several indicators of SDG, such as data on access to safe, accessible and sustainable transport system (indicator 11.2.1), proportion of cities





with a direct participation structure of civil society in urban planning (indicator 11.3.2) and average share of open space (indicator 11.7.1) are not available at the granular level. Also, regularity of publication of secondary datasets is another issue.

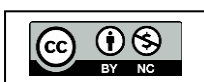
The publication of municipal finance data, which is one of the important data sources to assess the economic bases of cities, has been discontinued since 2001. Besides, the release of important datasets such as datasets on migration has been delayed for several years, which restricts evidence-based policy interventions for SDG implementation. In the recent past, MoHUA has taken several initiatives like Data Smart Cities Strategy, Data Maturity Assessment Framework, Climate Smart Cities Assessment Framework, Ease of Living Index and Municipal Performance Index for evidence-based planning, monitoring and evaluation of progress made in cities. Moreover, the NITI Aayog has developed an SDG India Index to regularly monitor the progress of SDGs at the state level.

MoSPI has also played an important role in developing a comprehensive National Indicator Framework along with releasing the Progress Reports on SDGs. These are powerful tools for states and union territories to identify the gap areas and channelize resources to fill the gaps. However, despite these efforts, there are several indicators for which data is not available or collected by respective agencies.

V. CONCLUSION

Until now, India has adopted a top-down approach to design, implement and monitor SDG involving national and state governments. This effort has not percolated to the city level, especially in the medium and small size towns. The political economy of urban development is already biased towards metropolitan cities and big urban centres and adopting top-down approach would lead to an asymmetrical development. Therefore, to achieve SDG, a bottom-up approach is required. The movement towards sustainable growth and development requires multi-stakeholder engagement under a long-term vision. India is a country with 28 States, 9 Union Territories and more than 700 districts and more than 7000 cities and towns with significant geographical, demographic and socio-cultural diversities coupled with regional variations in socio-economic development. Also, about half of the towns are 'census towns'.

Unfortunately, these towns are unacknowledged as 'urban' by the state governments. In this context, it is important to recognize these newly created towns as statutory towns and bring about planned development from the beginning. This would contain the growth of slums and sprawl development and promote sustainable urbanization. Also given the large number of towns and cities, adopting a national action plan is not sufficient to achieve SDG. The Indian government needs to develop a robust SDG localization process involving state and ULBs to adopt SDG and its different targets, determine the local means of implementation and design the monitoring and evaluation frameworks. Several studies have recommended the implementation of the 74th CAA to empower cities as the third tier of governance by transferring the much-needed funds, functions and functionaries. This is still an unfinished agenda, although, the Government of India (GoI) has made several attempts to implement the tenets of this Act through mandatory reforms under various Missions of urban development.





An early action in this regard would facilitate the cities to be at the forefront of planning, implementation and monitoring of SDG. The overlap of functional jurisdictions is another challenge which needs to be addressed by assigning the development agencies clear roles and responsibilities without diluting the role of the ULBs. These agencies need to work together in a well-coordinated way. To localize SDG at the neighborhood level, ward committees need to be constituted and entrusted with adequate devolution of funds.

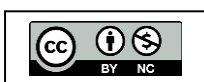
The achievement of SDG also depends on the financial autonomy provided to ULBs for mobilizing resources through taxes, user charges and other instruments. In the absence of financial autonomy, achieving SDG in a time bound manner would be difficult task. Therefore, a transparent, progressive and implementable revenue sharing model between the states and cities is imperative to achieve SDG. The smaller cities and towns may adopt financial resource management by pooling their resources for shared infrastructure facilities by which two or more municipalities and adjoining rural areas can benefit.

Capacity building and advocacy are the most important part of localization of SDG. Several small and medium sized cities lack the administrative, financial and technical capabilities to perform the mandated functions. Inadequate capabilities of municipal authorities prevent urban projects from achieving SDG targets. A dedicated municipal cadre needs to be established with relevant skills and specialization to perform the tasks required for improving the conditions in Indian urban space. Availability of robust and timely data sources is essential for monitoring progress of SDG. In this regard, an SDG Cell needs to be established in every city to collect and compile local level data related to SDG. The cities need to have dedicated budget and specialized manpower to perform these tasks. A GIS-based approach should be adopted in the collection of data and monitoring of the targets and indicators.

Technology driven solutions need to be promoted. Serious efforts need to be taken by all stakeholders to reach SDG targets within the 2030 timeframe. Launching new programmers to meet the goals will be a difficult task. In this regard, we need to reorient and repurpose current programmers related to SDG. In addition, vulnerable communities and the new poor in urban spaces need to be given more attention if the country wants to move towards a sustainable path and build sustainable cities and communities.

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