

ICONSPADU 2021**International Conference on Sustainable Practices, Development and Urbanisation****A STRATEGIC PERSPECTIVE OF POLITICAL COMMITMENT
TO SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT IN INDIA**

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Abstract

As adopted by the United Nations, the 2030 agenda for sustainable development envisions the earth to be a better place by the year 2030 while giving a blueprint on the way to get there. The goal is to remove inequality, poverty, and strife while rejuvenating the planet by taking care of the environment. As a developing country and the second most populous country globally, India will hold the key to attaining these goals. The Government of India (GoI) is committed to realizing sustainable development goals (SDGs) as laid out by the United Nations (UN). The National Agenda for inclusive growth and progress, as reflected in its motto of “Sabka Saath Sabka Vikas” is closely aligned with the goals laid out by the UN. In the “Voluntary National Review (VNR)” submitted to the UN, India has taken stock of the global agenda through the narratives of Sashakt Bharat - Sabal Bharat (Empowered and Resilient India), Swachh Bharat - Swasth Bharat (Clean and Healthy India), Samagra Bharat - Saksham Bharat (Inclusive and Entrepreneurial India), Satat Bharat – Sanatan Bharat (Sustainable India) and Sampanna Bharat-Samridh Bharat (Prosperous and Vibrant India). To this end, the GoI has also come out with an SDG Index to keep track of the progress made. This paper will study the progress made in the schemes mentioned in the above narratives by using information from secondary sources and giving suggestions for improvement.

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1. Introduction

The future we want is a war cry that the United Nations made to propagate sustainable living. This was later extended to “The 2030 Agenda for Sustainable development,” a blueprint for the one hundred and ninety-three member nations to make sustainable the world we live in. It contains 17 goals that member nations should achieve by the year 2030. While many nations have achieved these goals, the advent of the Covid 19 induced pandemic derailed and delayed the movement. As countries get vaccinated and the pandemic seems to be waning, it is time to take stock of the situation today.

The Global Sustainable Development Study highlighted the agenda 2030 for Sustainable Development's interconnected nature, which emphasizes the scientific research interface as an evidence-based practise in the 2030 agenda's implementation across the socio-economic and environmental aspects of sustainability.

Though the problems of defining and executing goals are numerous, the practical issue of adapting the SDGs to local circumstances is also essential. This feature is connected to broader concerns about post-colonialism and global impositions, which are essential. Development must be developed locally, in local terms, and based on regional vision if owned and not seen as an imposition (Shulla et al., 2021).

Further, the backsliding of democratic governance accentuated by states of exception compounded by the resurgence of authoritarian regimes has widened global inequality. While the pandemic has resulted in the closing of borders, restricted movements, and authoritarian actions, it has also facilitated the dire need for global interdependence and collaboration at various levels.

As such, combating COVID-19 pandemic has become the focal point while the achievement of SDGs within the stipulated time frame of 2030 has been relegated to as a secondary concern. Though the span of the ongoing pandemic remains uncertain, it impacts all SDG's given its interconnected nature. The global and local responses to the pandemic have also revealed glaring anomalies that need to be studied and addressed. The after-effects of the abrupt response to the pandemic have been felt in almost all sectors from agriculture to tourism and healthcare with deep ramifications. Thus, countries and governments must take stock of the impact of the pandemic at various levels, especially on global sustainability concerns. Equally important for countries is to chart post-pandemic recovery and transformational measures at the global and country-specific contextual levels to work with solidarity and interdependence to achieve the goals. Through well-structured policy formulations, this can be facilitated by rebuilding resilience and synchronicity between the various inter-linked sectors and the SDGs. In fact, with the pandemic impacting the socio-economic and environmental dimensions of SDGs, it is incumbent on the government to take control of the suppression of the pandemic, through non-medical interventions and global access to vaccines. Addressing the Pandemic using preparedness and response is of utmost importance for sustainable development and economic recovery. This requires worldwide interdependence and support wherein the international community could reach out to developing countries severely impacted by the current crisis in reviving resources to finance SDG goals. At this point of time, what is desperately needed is political will and commitment.

1.1. Sustainable Development Goals

There are a total of seventeen goals as laid out by the United Nations (Desa, 2016). It includes eradicating poverty and hunger, ensuring healthy lives and quality education, achieving gender equality, ensuring availability of water and sanitation, ensuring access to sustainable and modern energy, promoting sustained and inclusive economic growth, facilitating full and productive employment for all, building sustainable infrastructure, reducing inequalities within and among countries, making cities and human settlements inclusive and sustainable, ensuring sustainable consumption, combating climate change, conserving and maintaining the balance of the ecosystem. The last two goals are to provide justice, peace and strengthen the global movement towards sustainability. The future we want is also intrinsically linked to the fourth industrial revolution, with many believing that “technology” will shape their future. This could pose a potential threat, and therefore we ought to be cautious while using this technology so that it doesn’t widen the gap between the haves and the have-nots. (Barton, 2021) If not, in the times to come, it might become difficult to separate the real from the artificial. The presence of Science and Technology is ubiquitous and therefore we should use it for global wellbeing.

1.2. India and the Sustainable Development Goals

India, being one of the oldest civilizations, spanning 4000 years, is blessed with a rich cultural heritage. As the seventh largest country globally, it is separated from the rest of Asia through the great Himalayas in the north and the seas in the South. At the time of its Independence in 1947, it was reeling under poverty and poised to be one of the world's leading economies. It consists of 28 states and eight Union Territories (National Informatics centre, 2017). Each State and Union territory has a distinct culture, language, food, and festival. India is a part of the United Nations and is committed to the attainment of the SDGs. Being home to one-sixth of the world's population, India's responsibility is to achieve the SDGs. The Indian Government is focused on achieving the SDGs by implementing various schemes for inclusive and sustainable growth (Niti Aayog, 2020a).

India is a large country with a sizeable and aspirational middle class. Its citizens desire a better life, and this can happen only by planning for a sustainable future. This makes Indian citizens very motivated to achieve the SDGs and puts pressure on the ruling Government to give citizens "the future we want". This future is in complete alignment with the goals laid out by the United Nations and can only be realised if there is a strong political commitment. Literature has suggested that while India has made a little progress in achieving economic and social targets (Bhambu, 2020; Mohanty, 2021) it is way behind in achieving environmental targets (Jatav, 2021).

2. Problem Statement

The National Agenda for inclusive growth and progress, as reflected in the current Indian government’s motto of “Sabka Saath Sabka Vikas” is closely aligned with the goals laid out by the United Nations. The following are the five narratives of the Government of India, as mentioned in the VRN, which are aligned with achieving the SDGs by 2030:

- i. Sashakt Bharat - Sabal Bharat (Empowered and Resilient India)
- ii. Swachh Bharat - Swasth Bharat (Clean and Healthy India)
- iii. Samagra Bharat - Saksham Bharat (Inclusive and Entrepreneurial India)
- iv. Satat Bharat – Sanatan Bharat (Sustainable India)
- v. Sampanna Bharat- Samridh Bharat (Prosperous and Vibrant India)
- vi. As the government gears up to achieving the 2030 goals, it is an apt time to measure the progress for the same and make suggestions wherever appropriate.

3. Research Questions

Is India on track in achieving the SDGs for 2030?

4. Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this study is to measure the progress achieved towards the attainment of the SDGs and the distance yet to be covered. The government came out with two reports, each in 2019 and 2020, and a “Voluntary National Review 2020 (VRN)” which measured the progress made. This paper attempts to measure the progress since then through the five narratives outlined in the VRN, which are a report of India’s progress in attainment of the SDGs. While the country was well onto its way to achieve the targets set out, the Covid-19 pandemic struck, derailing the process. Hence, it is necessary to take stock of the progress made by tracking the various schemes implemented to achieve the goals mapped by the United Nations.

5. Research Methods

This is a descriptive research design. Data is gathered through secondary sources such as journals, newspaper reports and government websites. The data is matched with the claims made in the “VRN” to gauge if India will be able to achieve the SDG’s by 2030 and create a better country for its citizens by means of universal and accessible education, affordable healthcare and a clean environment

6. Findings

India has submitted the “Voluntary National Review 2020 (VRN)” to the United Nations which maps the progress the country has made towards achieving the SDGs (Niti Aayog 2020b). The review showcases the national agenda for inclusive growth through the five narratives mentioned above. These five narratives are implemented in the country through different schemes which are implemented by different ministries and the National Institute for Transforming India Aayog (Niti Aayog, 2020a). In this section, all five narratives will be examined. These five narratives are aligned with the SDGs as outlined by the United Nations. For example, the first narrative is aligned to Goal 1 of the SDGs which is to end poverty. The second narrative is aligned to Goals 2, 3 and 6 of the SDGs that is to end hunger, ensure good health and sanitation for all. The third is aligned to Goals 4, 5, 8 and 10 of the SDGs which is to ensure good health, quality education, means of employment for all, the fourth to Goals 6, 7, 9 and 12 of

the SDGs that is to ensure a sustainable future for all and the fifth narrative is aligned to achieving Goals 8, 9, 12 and 16 which lead to creating an economically vibrant society.

The nodal agency for overlooking the achievement of the SDGs is the “Niti Aayog”. Figure 1 shows the performance of various states and Union territories on all the SDGs. Each region is marked as an “Aspirant”, “Performer”, “Front Runner” and “Achiever” according to the score it has got. Interestingly, the Union Territories have scored more than the States. This could be as being smaller in area and under the direct administration of the centre, they were better able to implement the various schemes of the government. The areas in which a perfect 100 has been scored is for SDG 5 by Chandigarh (UT), SDG 9 (D and Nagar Haveli (UT), Daman and Diu(UT) and Delhi (UT), SDG 12 by Nagaland, SDG 13 by Lakshadweep (UT), and SDG 15 by Manipur, Sikkim, D and Nagar Haveli (UT) and Lakshadweep (UT) (Niti Aayog, 2020b).

States/UTs	SDG 1	SDG 2	SDG 3	SDG 4	SDG 5	SDG 6	SDG 7	SDG 8	SDG 9	SDG 10	SDG 11	SDG 12	SDG 13	SDG 15	SDG 16	Composite SDG
	Index Score															
Andhra Pradesh	69	35	76	52	37	96	86	78	66	68	36	57	70	86	86	67
Arunachal Pradesh	34	66	50	58	33	88	74	52	31	38	43	67	31	71	62	53
Assam	48	39	44	44	33	78	70	62	46	67	40	68	47	90	52	55
Bihar	33	26	44	19	40	81	62	64	47	74	50	47	43	54	64	50
Chhattisgarh	49	27	52	52	43	92	56	67	38	60	49	58	29	97	71	56
Goa	53	76	60	71	46	77	95	71	45	19	79	63	41	99	79	65
Gujarat	47	39	67	47	36	92	75	75	88	59	77	33	63	77	86	64
Haryana	47	43	65	68	36	81	77	71	73	54	49	39	34	40	76	57
Himachal Pradesh	60	44	67	81	52	82	64	76	70	78	79	52	61	92	84	69
Jharkhand	28	22	55	42	34	78	50	70	70	64	57	36	27	99	67	53
Karnataka	49	37	72	67	42	88	86	78	40	70	48	72	71	89	75	66
Kerala	64	74	82	74	51	77	70	61	88	75	51	57	56	98	77	70
Madhya Pradesh	40	24	50	54	45	92	62	67	44	68	55	58	47	94	63	58
Maharashtra	47	34	76	65	41	93	82	70	59	70	45	71	50	85	72	64
Manipur	42	69	62	70	34	87	72	27	43	81	28	85	37	100	70	60
Meghalaya	68	35	53	55	34	70	52	65	22	76	22	60	36	99	59	54
Mizoram	67	75	52	61	37	81	81	42	8	66	33	50	45	75	63	56
Nagaland	56	70	29	47	42	75	70	28	23	61	23	100	51	94	84	57
Odisha	47	34	61	40	35	85	50	59	72	69	51	44	69	99	61	58
Punjab	48	61	71	67	46	74	89	65	69	50	61	35	57	59	83	62
Rajasthan	56	35	58	51	39	76	61	65	38	70	61	30	60	75	76	57
Sikkim	65	66	59	58	49	79	97	68	27	64	74	60	38	100	69	65
Tamil Nadu	72	48	76	70	40	90	90	74	53	65	51	63	45	91	78	67
Telangana	52	36	66	64	26	84	93	82	61	94	62	58	66	88	77	67
Tripura	70	49	61	55	32	69	56	63	48	45	31	92	37	88	73	58
Uttar Pradesh	40	31	34	48	41	94	63	64	63	46	56	62	48	62	69	55
Uttarakhand	64	45	58	66	38	90	78	73	55	59	51	50	59	95	85	64
West Bengal	52	40	70	50	38	83	58	72	68	73	34	57	37	88	73	60
A and N Islands	48	38	65	61	48	85	73	55	13	94	47	69	72	85	65	61
Chandigarh	48	73	54	80	47	100	84	64	74	33	83	77	54	93	89	70
D and N Haveli	33	45	57	53	44	91	80	63	100	57	41	65	41	100	80	63
Daman & Diu	58	12	50	43	39	96	81	54	100	80	54	41	46	89	76	61
Delhi	54	56	54	64	27	61	96	60	100	69	63	39	30	82	64	61
Jammu & Kashmir	58	55	62	54	53	85	76	46	49	47	33	61	59	74	69	59
Lakshadweep	56	57	58	62	37	69	43	43	0	93	Null	75	100	100	82	63
Puducherry	56	71	71	67	35	86	97	58	86	92	53	43	39	37	94	66
India	50	35	61	58	42	88	70	64	65	64	53	55	60	66	72	60
Target	100	100	100	100	100	100	100	100	100	100	100	100	100	100	100	100

● Aspirant (0-49) ● Performer (50-64) ● Front Runner (65-99) ● Achiever (100)

(Source: Niti Aayog, Government of India)

Figure 1. Performance of states and UT’s on SDGs

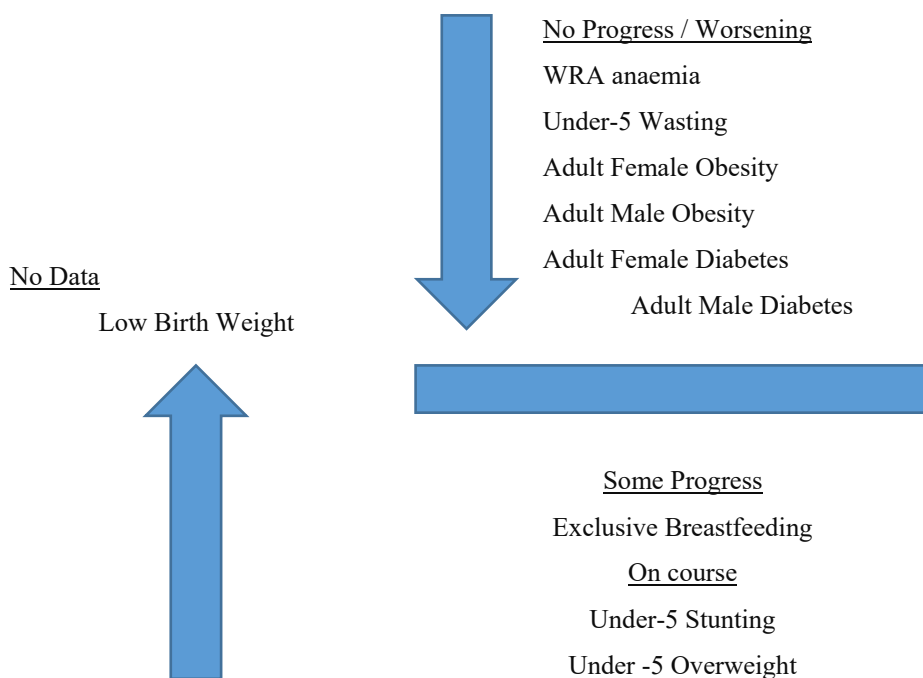
6.1. Sashakt Bharat - Sabal Bharat (Empowered and Resilient India)

While the government says that it was able to bring 271 million out of poverty in the previous years, the “periodic labour force survey” paints a dismal picture. It shows that the number of poor people has actually risen in the past few years from 269.8 million in the years 2011-12 to 348 million in the years 2019-20 (Mehrotra & Parida, 2021). The pandemic has forced 75 million into poverty. India’s middle class has also shrunk by 30 percent (Kocchar, 2021). This narrative is linked to Goal one of the SDGs and proves that we are not successful in arresting poverty. Also, the areas in which there was high poverty were very slow in reducing poverty, as compared to where there was less poverty (Das et al., 2021).

6.2. Swachh Bharat - Swasth Bharat (Clean and Healthy India)

The scheme “Swachh Bharat” mission was launched by the Union Government in 2014 to make sanitation available universally and make India free from open defecation. The scheme mission was widely publicised and embraced by the public. The results have been hugely positive with payoffs in women’s safety as well (Dash & Dash, 2021). More than ten million toilets have been built and more than six lakh villages are open defecation free. The government is carrying forward the movement, by moving to the next stage to ensure that such behaviours are maintained and is providing ways for villages to manage solid and liquid waste (Department of Drinking Water and Sanitation, 2021).

The “National Nutrition Policy” was first launched by the “Ministry of Women And Child Welfare” in 1993 and then relaunched in 2017 by the “Ministry of Health and Family Welfare” to ensure adequate levels of nutrition to children and women (Niti Aayog, 2017). In the VRN submitted to the UN, India has pointed out that significant progress has been made in reducing stunted growth in children as well as in reducing mortality rates for women and children. In the month of September 2021, the prime minister announced the development of 35 fortified crops which will tackle the problem of malnutrition (Times News Network, 2021). However, in the global nutrition analysis, conducted by the “World health Organisation (WHO)”, India lags far behind in nearly all spheres related to health. It is expected that the nation will not achieve the targets set for 2025. Figure 2 is a snapshot from the “Global Nutrition Report 2020” which shows that India is on course to achieve only two of the 10 targets laid out (World Health Organisation, 2021).



(Source: Global Nutrition report, WHO)

Figure 2. Progress towards global nutrition targets

“Ayushman Bharat Pradhan Mantri Jan Arogya Yojana” is a public health insurance fund offered by the Government of India to the bottom 50% in the country. It gives a free health cover of 5 lakhs to poor people. It was envisioned to help more than 50 crore beneficiaries. So far, more than two crore beneficiaries have availed this scheme in the form of hospital admissions (National Health Authority, 2021). In his address to the nation on August 15th, 2021, the prime minister promised to further reach beneficiaries of major schemes launched by his government. The National Health Authority has ambitiously looked at exponentially increasing the number of beneficiaries in the “Ayushman Bharat Scheme”. The scheme has also not been as successful as envisioned as private hospitals which constitute approximately 40 percent of the hospitals involved in the scheme are not enthusiastic participants as the returns are not constructive (Sharma, 2021). The government has also launched the digital version of the same to ensure that there is an ecosystem for healthcare. The scheme envisions creating a “Health ID” for every Indian so that there is a record for all healthcare related events. The patient will control the access to the data. Service providers will also be benefited as all information on the patient will be available on a click (Dey, 2021).

6.3. Samagra Bharat - Saksham Bharat (Inclusive and Entrepreneurial India) :

The present government’s belief is that progress can happen only through social inclusion. There is a huge effort to make available social indicators like nutrition, health, education and social protection to all strata of society. There is also the recognition that progress can happen only if citizens are gainfully employed and thus there is encouragement to develop avenues for both entrepreneurship as well as

employment. There has been substantial progress on inclusivity with respect to gender and caste. The Armed forces are now more open to women with admission open to women in military colleges (BBC News, 2021). There is a discussion on various caste parameters and the role of reservations in jobs on a caste basis is being debated by none other than the Supreme Court of India. The Indian government has aimed for inclusive growth since the year 1947 when it gained Independence from the British. While there has been substantial progress, it is still a far cry for an equitable society (Bhattacharya & Pal, 2021).

Societies progress only when they have access to financial instruments and they are able to use these to improve their standard of living. To this end, the government has introduced a number of schemes, but only those benefit who can access government schemes. To make sure that the benefit of the schemes is availed by those who it was aimed at, the government has made concerted efforts. The government has introduced the concept of “Jan Dhan-Aadhaar-Mobile (JAM)” trinity in order to make the fruits of finance and hence progress and equity available to all. This trinity also tracks the flow of funds from the point of origin to consumption. The “JAM” scheme is aimed at making all citizens have a bank account, an Aadhaar card and a mobile phone.

Jan Dhan can be loosely translated to mean finance/money for all. It is meant “**to ensure access to financial services, namely, a basic savings & deposit accounts, remittance, credit, insurance, pension in an affordable manner**”. The scheme is aimed at first time bank users only and includes access to insurance and overdrafts. The latest statistics show that more than 400 million beneficiaries have opened bank accounts and the balance in these accounts is now ₹145,272PM.91 Crore. This scheme has also been lauded by the Guinness book of world records for the maximum number of bank accounts opened in a day.

The Aadhaar card is a card which is required to be held by all Indian citizens as a unique identification number. The “Unique Identification Authority of India (UIDAI)” is the body responsible for the Aadhaar card, under the Ministry of Electronics and Information Technology (MeitY). As on 31 March 21, the 128.99 crore Aadhaar numbers have been assigned to Indian residents. The card, having a biometric signature is very useful to residents as a means of identification, and thus a valid document to get access to subsidization, the public distribution system, direct benefit transfers, loans, and also acts as a photo ID and address ID. It also helps the government to curb leakages and ensuring that intended populations receive the benefits due to them. By giving government an accurate picture it helps them to better utilize their funds and the citizens money collected through taxes.

The mobile phone number is used for gaining access and tracking the various schemes launched by the government and private players. These schemes include getting credit from banks, insurance and Direct Benefit Transfers (DBT). Most banking transactions are also conducted through mobile apps as all banks have their dedicated portals which are accessible through the mobile phone. By the year 2020, India had more than a billion mobile phone users and more than 700 million were using the internet through the phone. It is estimated that by 2030 the number of mobile internet users would go up to more than a billion. The government of India has also wisely invested in the telecommunications sector and pushed Indians to make digital payments instead of cash payments through the Unified Payment Interface (UPI). There has been widespread adoption of the UPI and by June 2021, Indians had made transactions worth over 5 trillion rupees in the current financial year (PMINDIA, n.d.).

The “JAM” trinity has been a success and the Modi government can bask in its glory. While the UIDAI has been a government initiative, the banking and mobile concepts were successful due to a large participation from private players. It shows that when there is a strong commitment from the government, and it is supported and carried forward by private players, success is assured. Common citizens will participate either if initiatives like the Aadhaar card are mandatory, or the people can see the advantage of taking part in the initiatives linked to owning mobiles and opening bank accounts.

6.4. Satat Bharat – Sanatan Bharat (Sustainable India)

Clean and efficient energy systems, disaster-resistant infrastructure, and planned eco-restoration are all part of India's climate action plans. India has electrified 100 percent of its rural communities, reduced 38 million tonnes of CO2 emissions annually through energy efficient appliances, supplied clean cooking fuel to 80 million poor households, and developed a strategy to setup 450GW of renewable power and restore 26 million hectares of degraded land by 2030, all as a result of its nationally determined contributions (Niti Aayog, 2017). India is ranked third in renewable energy, fourth in wind energy, and fifth in solar energy globally. To harness global alliances for climate change and catastrophe resilience, India established the Coalition for Disaster Resilient Infrastructure and the International Solar Alliance.

6.5. Sampanna Bharat- Samridhh Bharat (Prosperous and Vibrant India)

A country can be prosperous only if there is gender equity and India is not. The “Periodic Labour Force Survey (PLFS)” has pointed out that there are only 18% female managers and this figure varies vastly across states. Most female managers are in the states of Meghalaya, Sikkim, Mizoram, Andhra Pradesh and Punjab (Gupta, 2021; Rao, 2021). A quick look at the data given in Table 1 shows that all states in India are lagging badly in attaining goal 5 which is to attain gender equality. The PLFS is a reflection of the same.

7. Conclusion

India is a member of the United Nations and while the government is completely committed to the attainment of the SDGs by the year 2030, this paper points out that India is not on course for the same. While there have been some successes as in the registration of Aadhar cards, opening of bank accounts, prevention of under 5 stunting etc, most of the goals are still far away. India is a large, diverse and developing country and Covid 19 has impacted it badly. The SDG 2 index has shown that successes have been greater in smaller states as in with lower populations or union territories. Subsequent policies on the attainment of SDG’s should take that as an indication of how the country can implement the schemes to achieve the targets set for the year 2030. India’s success in keeping the per capita rate low despite the growing population could be considered as a model for other developing nations. Infact, India can share some of its best practices within the SDG framework. Post -pandemic recovery includes leveraging on crucial experiences and learnings to pave the way forward while keeping the SDG goals at the epicentre of recovery measures.

As the crisis of the pandemic looms large it intensifies the necessity of progressing towards and harnessing of the SDG goals. Its realization is all the more important for critically reequipping to face future crises and challenges based on an awareness of prior shortcomings so that better and effective measures could be adopted. The focus on the attainment of SDG's would further bring governments and nations to adopt more inclusive and transformative recovery measures that addresses all the inter-linked levels of the SDG. Thus it only through multi-faceted and interdependent cooperation among nations and between governments can we forge the pathways to a fully realized sustainable development goal.

If the pandemic has taught us the inter-connectedness of our world, we must cooperate and converge in disseminating best practices in promoting a more healthy and sustainable future one that is not exclusive but modelled on inclusivity and well-being. India's largest successes have been in areas that directly impact her people as in healthcare and financial inclusion. Here the participation has been from government and private players. The other area has been in the adoption of the Aadhaar card which is mandatory. Here the government has pushed through the initiative. While there have been successes in these areas, there is cause for worry in other areas. The country still has a long way to go before achieving inclusive growth especially regarding gender equality. However, steps are being taken to achieve gender equality by the government as well as concerned citizen groups. This paper also reiterates the fact that initiatives are successful only when a strong political commitment is aided by strong participation from industry and citizens. The "Future We Want" as Indians will only come about if the political will is aided and encouraged by the will and participation of the common man.

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