

India's Sustainable Ascent: Integrating Economic Growth with SDGs for Global Leadership

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Abstract

This article examines the imperative of harmonizing India's rapid economic expansion with the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals. The research objectives include analyzing the alignment between economic growth and SDGs, identifying challenges and opportunities in achieving sustainability, evaluating policy effectiveness, and proposing a roadmap for accelerated SDG achievement and global leadership. Employing a qualitative, descriptive, and analytical research design, the study relies on secondary data from academic literature, government reports, and NITI Aayog's SDG India Index. Major findings reveal India's strong institutional commitment to SDGs, evidenced by progress in poverty reduction and renewable energy. However, challenges persist from historical environmentally impactful growth, data reliability issues, and social disparities. Opportunities lie in green finance and decentralized governance. The paper concludes by proposing a roadmap for enhanced policy coherence, strengthened data ecosystems, diversified financial mobilization, inclusive growth strategies, and proactive global leadership to cement India's role in a sustainable future.

Keywords: India's Economic Growth, Sustainable Development Goals, Sustainable Global Leadership, Policy Interventions, Green Growth

1. Introduction

In an era defined by interconnected global challenges and unprecedented opportunities, the pursuit of sustainable development has emerged as a paramount objective for nations worldwide. India, characterized by its robust economy, expanding population, and increasing international prominence, stands at a critical juncture where its economic trajectory holds the potential to significantly shape its own future and substantially contribute to worldwide sustainability endeavours. This article examines the critical imperative of harmonizing the nation's rapid economic expansion with the transformative agenda of the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals.

India's economic journey has been characterized by robust growth, positioning it as one of the fastest-growing major economies globally, with projections anticipating it to become the world's third-largest economy by 2027 after the US and China and aspiring to achieve high-

income status by 2047 under the "Viksit Bharat" vision (Kumar & Maiti, 2024). This impressive growth, however, necessitates a balanced approach that addresses the inherent environmental and social ramifications (Choudhary & Srivastava, 2020; Udemba et al., 2020). Recognizing this, India has unequivocally affirmed its commitment to the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development since 2015, integrating the SDGs into its national development framework. The ethos of 'Sab ka Saath, Sab ka Vikas' underscores the government's dedication to inclusive and sustainable progress (NITI Aayog, 2024).

The institutionalization of SDGs in India has been spearheaded by bodies like NITI Aayog, which has been instrumental in making these goals an integral part of national policy formulation through a "whole-of-society" approach. Flagship government initiatives such as Ayushman Bharat and Swachh Bharat Abhiyan directly align with SDG priorities, demonstrating a concerted effort to achieve tangible outcomes. Notable progress has been made in areas like poverty reduction, with 248 million people lifted out of multidimensional poverty in recent years, placing India ahead of schedule for SDG 1 targets. Furthermore, the nation is actively pursuing green growth strategies, focusing on renewable energy promotion, pollution reduction, and efficient waste management to reconcile economic expansion with environmental preservation (Mukherjee, 2025). Efforts towards energy independence by 2047, driven by aggressive clean technology deployment, further exemplify this commitment (Abhyankar et al., 2023).

As the world's most populous nation and a significant voice for the Global South, India's success in integrating economic growth with the SDGs is crucial for the global community (NITI Aayog, 2024). Through its G20 presidency, India has championed ambitious environmental sustainability targets, including the 'Panchamrita' goals, aiming for significant reductions in carbon emissions and a transition to renewable energy sources (Ogden, 2023). This study aims to present a comprehensive framework, outlining strategies and policy interventions, to enable India to not only attain its sustainable development objectives but also reinforce its standing as a global leader in cultivating an equitable and ecologically sound future.

2. Literature Review

The contemporary literature consistently highlights the imperative to align economic growth with sustainable development, a critical challenge for rapidly developing nations like India. NITI Aayog spearheads this localization utilizing tools like the SDG India Index & Dashboard to monitor progress and foster competitive federalism among states and Union Territories (NITI Aayog, 2021, 2024). The government's commitment is also underscored by its adherence to the Paris Climate Agreement (Brown et al., 2020).

2.1 Challenges of Economic Growth and Environmental Sustainability

India's rapid economic expansion, while driving global influence, generates significant environmental and social strains (Choudhary & Srivastava, 2020). Mahato (2025a) argues that in order to reduce environmental degradation, promote resilience, and guarantee that urban expansion is really inclusive and sustainable for all people, specific policy initiatives, increased investment, and strong subnational governance systems are essential. Industrialization and urbanization exacerbate pollution (air, water), soil erosion, deforestation, and natural resource degradation (Dwivedi & Kishore, 1982; Kumar et al., 2022; Pachauri, 2004). Small and large enterprises contribute significantly to environmental impacts, with small businesses often cited as the worst polluters (D'Souza & Peretiatko, 2002). India is the world's third-largest emitter of climate-changing gases, and its rapid growth has driven up CO₂ emissions (Chipalkatti & Rishi, 2015). Furthermore, India's potential as a global manufacturing hub could significantly impact global greenhouse gas emissions (Zhang et al., 2025). Socio-economic challenges include high income inequality, with millions lacking access to electricity, safe drinking water, and adequate housing (Gupta et al., 2019; Reddy, 2020). Inadequate infrastructure, complex regulations, and a lack of skilled labour further impede progress (Yang, 2023).

2.2 Policy Frameworks and Strategic Interventions

In response, India has implemented diverse policy frameworks promoting green growth and sustainable development. Initiatives focus on renewable energy, pollution reduction, improved waste disposal, and wildlife protection (Mukherjee, 2025). Programs like Digital India and the Shyama Prasad Mukherji Rurban Mission leverage technology for sustainable rural development (Pathak & Deshkar, 2023). Policies also align the agri-food sector with sustainability principles (Pathak, 2023). India targets 450 GW of renewable energy capacity by 2030, supported by R&D (Agrawal et al., 2024). The nation aims for near-complete energy independence by 2047 via aggressive deployment of clean technologies such as renewables, electric vehicles, and green hydrogen (Abhyankar et al., 2023). Public procurement markets and corporate social responsibility expenditures are leveraged for green standards and development in sectors like education and healthcare (Nair et al., 2021).

2.3 India's Global Leadership and Advocacy

India increasingly positions itself as a global leader in sustainable development, advocating for the Global South and multilateralism. The nation sees itself as a leader in sustainability, setting a positive precedent through its distinctive approach, which integrates contemporary development strategies with traditional knowledge, exemplified by the ancient Indian saying 'vasudhaiva kutumbakam' (Sharma, 2024). At COP26, Prime Minister Modi announced India's 'Panchamrita' commitments: net-zero emissions by 2070, 50% renewable energy capacity by 2030, and reducing carbon intensity by 45% by 2030 (Hommel & Murphy, 2012). These, coupled with the International Solar Alliance, underscore India's commitment to setting a positive sustainability example and fostering global partnerships (Ogden, 2023). India has

transitioned from a protest voice to actively shaping global environmental policy, particularly in climate change negotiations (Bhasin, 2019; Mohan, 2017).

3. Research Objectives

The research objectives are to:

- i. Analyse the current state of alignment between India's economic growth strategies and its commitment to the Sustainable Development Goals.
- ii. Identify the key challenges and opportunities encountered in harmonizing rapid economic expansion with environmental sustainability and social equity within India.
- iii. Evaluate the effectiveness of existing policy frameworks and strategic interventions aimed at achieving the SDGs in India.
- iv. Propose a comprehensive roadmap outlining actionable strategies and policy recommendations for India to accelerate SDG achievement and solidify its role as a global leader in sustainable development.

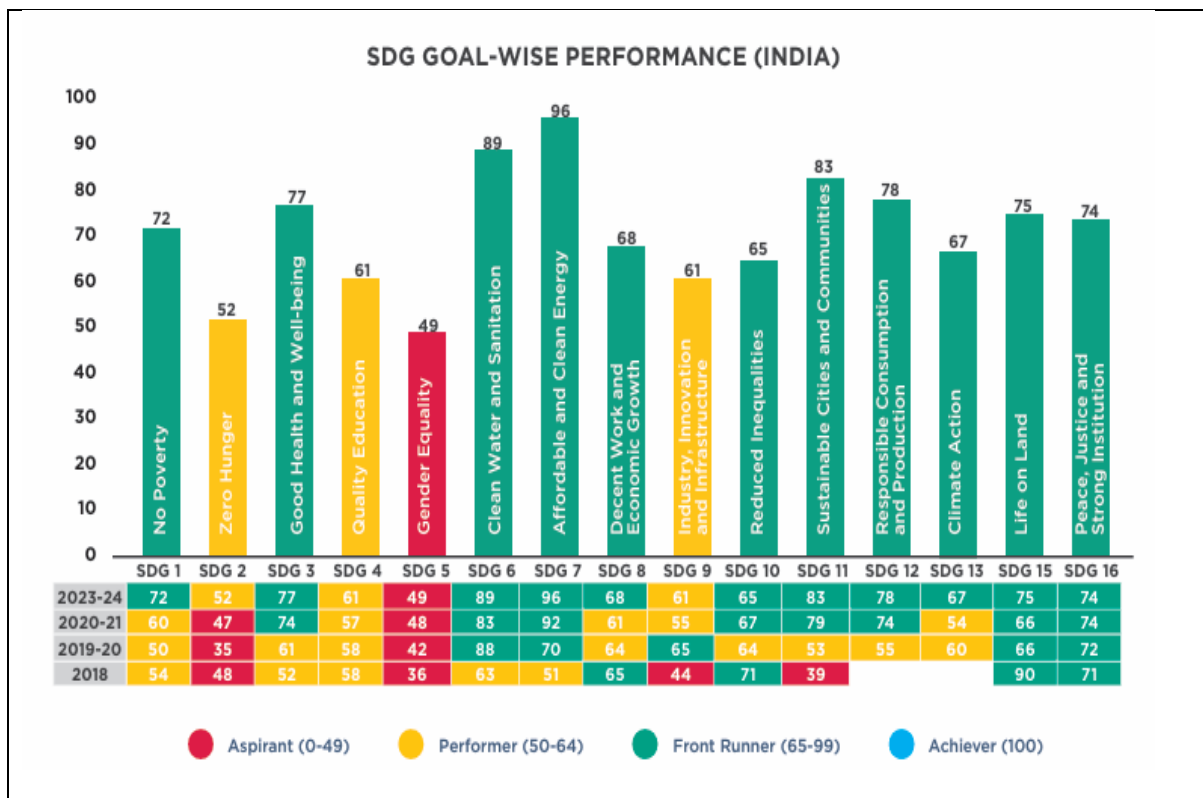
4. Methodology

The research will employ a qualitative, descriptive, and analytical approach, primarily relying on secondary data analysis. Data collection will involve a comprehensive review of academic literature, policy documents, government reports (e.g., NITI Aayog's SDG India Index), and publications from international organizations related to India's economic growth, sustainable development, and SDG implementation. The analysis will utilize content and thematic analysis to identify current alignments, challenges, and opportunities. A comparative policy analysis will evaluate the effectiveness of existing interventions. The findings will be synthesized to construct a robust roadmap and policy recommendations for India's sustainable global leadership.

5. Result and Discussion

5.1 Alignment of India's Economic Growth Strategies with SDGs

India's economic growth strategies demonstrate a strong, albeit evolving, alignment with the Sustainable Development Goals. NITI Aayog, as the nodal body, has successfully integrated the 2030 Agenda into national policy-making, making SDGs an integral part of India's development narrative (NITI Aayog, 2021, 2024). This institutionalization is reflected in the SDG India Index, which serves as a crucial monitoring tool, highlighting progress at both national and sub-national levels. The SDGs in India consist of 16 goals, which are at par with the United Nations SDGs targets. The SDG India Index conceived in 2018 by NITI Aayog tracks the progress of SDG implementation in the country. The SDG goal wise performance of India for the year 2023-24 has been presented in figure 1.



Source: SDG India Index 2023-24 by NITI Aayog

Economically, India has made significant strides in poverty alleviation, with 248 million people escaping multidimensional poverty within a span of nine years (NITI Aayog, 2024). This demonstrates how economic growth, when directed through targeted interventions, can directly contribute to social development goals. Furthermore, the nation's commitment to "Viksit Bharat" by 2047, aiming for high-income status, is framed within the larger context of sustainable progress and inclusive growth, guided by the ethos of 'Sab ka Saath, Sab ka Vikas'.

However, the historical trajectory of India's economic growth has often presented a "slanting S-shaped" Environmental Kuznets Curve, where early stages of growth were frequently accompanied by environmental degradation (Mukherjee & Kathuria, 2006; Pachauri, 2004). This indicates a past disjuncture where economic expansion was prioritized, sometimes at the cost of ecological health (Choudhary & Srivastava, 2020; Orhan et al., 2021). More recent strategies, such as aggressive deployment of clean technologies and targets for energy independence by 2047, reflect a conscious shift towards better alignment between economic growth and environmental sustainability (Abhyankar et al., 2023; Mukherjee, 2025).

5.2 Challenges and Opportunities in Harmonizing Economic Expansion with Sustainability

Challenges

The rapid pace of industrialization and urbanization in India continues to exert immense pressure on environmental and natural resources, leading to issues like pollution, deforestation,

and resource depletion. As the world's third-largest greenhouse gas emitter, India faces significant vulnerability to climate change impacts, including extreme weather events. At the same time particle pollution from fossil fuels, a byproduct of economic activities, poses severe health consequences, underscoring the trade-offs involved in development decisions. The literature also points to systemic challenges in SDG implementation, such as data reliability, technical capacity gaps, inadequate planning, and insufficient financial resources (NITI Aayog, 2024). Socially, despite overall progress, high income inequality and persistent gender disparities remain significant hurdles, threatening inclusive growth (Pal, 2023).

Opportunities

India possesses unique opportunities to harmonize economic expansion with sustainability. The strong political will to integrate SDGs into national planning provides a robust framework. The nation's federal structure allows for decentralized governance, enabling states to tailor SDG interventions to local contexts (NITI Aayog, 2024). There's a growing emphasis on green growth strategies, supported by green finance initiatives that aim to channel private investment towards sustainable ventures (Bhatnagar et al., 2022; Potluri & Phani, 2020; Sreenu & Mishra, 2023). Furthermore, India's experience in sustainable development can serve as a valuable blueprint for other South Asian and Asia Pacific economies, offering a model for balancing growth with environmental and social considerations.

5.3 Effectiveness of Existing Policy Frameworks and Interventions

India has implemented a multi-layered approach to SDG achievement through various policy frameworks and strategic interventions. NITI Aayog's leadership in SDG localization and the monitoring through the SDG India Index have been crucial in driving progress and fostering competitive federalism. India demonstrates notable progress in several SDGs. The country is on track to achieve SDG 1, with over 135 million people escaping multidimensional poverty, and recorded an SDG 1 Index Score of 72 in 2023-24 (NITI Aayog, 2024). Significant advancements in renewable energy contribute to SDG 7, reflected in an SDG 7 Index Score of 96 in 2023-24 (NITI Aayog, 2024).

However, systemic challenges persist. For health, despite an improved SDG 3 Index Score of 77 in 2023-24, significant gaps remain in healthcare access and quality, compounded by a shortage of trained personnel and inadequate public health spending (Nair et al., 2021; NITI Aayog, 2024; Sharma & Popli, 2023). Flagship government schemes like Swachh Bharat Abhiyan (sanitation) directly align with SDG targets, demonstrating a concerted effort to achieve tangible outcomes (NITI Aayog, 2021). Programs such as the Aspirational Districts and Blocks Programme actively work to improve governance and service delivery in underdeveloped regions (NITI Aayog, 2024).

In terms of environmental sustainability, India has achieved its initial Nationally Determined Contribution target for 2030 well ahead of schedule and now sources 40% of its electricity from non-fossil fuels (NITI Aayog, 2024). The ambitious target of 450 GW of renewable energy capacity by 2030, coupled with aggressive clean technology deployment, showcases a proactive shift towards sustainable energy (Abhyankar et al., 2023). The emerging "co-benefits approach" integrates climate policy with development goals, allowing for concurrent progress in both areas (Stahlke, 2023). Additionally, the Companies Act's Corporate Social Responsibility mandate has been identified as a mechanism for aligning corporate activities with national developmental agendas and SDGs (Mitra & Chatterjee, 2019).

In education, while secondary enrolment has grown, adult literacy and vocational training access remain challenging (Adriansen, 2016). Gender equality also faces hurdles, with an SDG 5 Index Score of 49 in 2023-24 (NITI Aayog, 2024). Progress on gender equality remains an area of concern, with many states classified as "aspirants" in the NITI Aayog's index, indicating significant work ahead to address issues like low female labor force participation and discrimination. Challenges include patriarchal views, discrimination, lack of education, and domestic violence, impeding women's empowerment.

In labour law reforms, Mahato (2025b) claims that the creation of four comprehensive labour codes from 44 central laws is a major attempt to update India's regulatory structure, which is crucial for the country's economic development. In particular, the expansion of coverage to gig workers and the pursuit of universal floor pay demonstrate wide unity and good intent in these new codes.

However, the effectiveness of these interventions is constrained by persistent systemic challenges. The availability and reliability of data, along with weak technical capacity at various levels, hinder accurate monitoring and evaluation. Despite increased public spending, a more efficient translation of these resources into desired outcomes is needed (NITI Aayog, 2024).

5.4 Roadmap for Accelerating SDG Achievement and Global Leadership

Based on this analysis, a comprehensive roadmap for India to accelerate SDG achievement and solidify its global leadership role would entail several key strategies:

- i. **Enhanced Policy Coherence and Integration:** Continuously refine policy frameworks to ensure seamless integration of economic, environmental, and social objectives, moving beyond isolated interventions to a holistic sustainable development paradigm.
- ii. **Strengthened Data Ecosystem:** Invest in robust data collection, analysis, and reporting mechanisms to overcome data reliability issues, enabling more precise monitoring, evidence-based policymaking, and identification of critical intervention areas (NITI Aayog, 2024).

- iii. **Diversified Financial Mobilization:** Explore innovative financial mechanisms, including further leveraging green finance, public-private partnerships, and international collaborations, to bridge the significant financing gaps for SDG implementation (NITI Aayog, 2024).
- iv. **Inclusive Growth Strategies:** Prioritize policies that explicitly address income inequality and social disparities, ensuring that the benefits of economic growth are equitably distributed across all sections of society (Aggarwal et al., 2019; Agrawal, 2018; Pal, 2023). This includes targeted interventions for education, healthcare, and gender equality, particularly for lagging SDGs like SDG 5 (NITI Aayog, 2024).
- v. **Scaling Green Technologies and Innovation:** Continue aggressive investment in renewable energy, sustainable agriculture, and eco-friendly industrial practices. Foster an ecosystem for green innovation and entrepreneurship that drives technological advancements for sustainable solutions.
- vi. **Proactive Global Leadership:** Leverage its influential position in forums like the G20, International Solar Alliance, and Coalition for Disaster Resilient Infrastructure to advocate for equitable global climate action, reforms in international financial architecture, and South-South cooperation (NITI Aayog, 2024). By promoting the 'whole-of-society' approach and its 'vasudhaiva kutumbakam' philosophy, India can continue to inspire global collective action towards a sustainable and equitable future.

6. Conclusion and Implication

This research has tried to explore India's critical journey in aligning its robust economic growth with the Sustainable Development Goals, aiming to establish a roadmap for sustainable global leadership. While India has demonstrated remarkable progress in areas like poverty reduction and renewable energy adoption, significant challenges persist in environmental sustainability, social equity, and data infrastructure. The institutional framework, particularly NITI Aayog's role, has been pivotal in integrating SDGs into national policy. However, addressing these systemic challenges and fostering genuinely inclusive development mandates more refined and precisely targeted interventions.

The implications of India's successful alignment of economic growth with the SDG agenda are far-reaching: it not only guarantees a sustainable future for its large population but also offers a compelling paradigm for the Global South. By employing its "whole-of-society" strategy and championing international collaboration, India can solidify its standing as a prominent advocate in forging a more equitable and ecologically robust world.

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