



LOCALISATION OF SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT GOALS (SDGs) IN THE NORTH-EASTERN REGION OF INDIA: A CRITICAL APPRAISAL

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Abstract: A new milestone in India's sustainable development journey is the localisation of Sustainable Development Goals at district level in the North-eastern states and subsequent release of the NER District SDG Index Report 2021-22. The article attempts to make a critical appraisal of this report along with the localisation initiative. Despite of the innovative venture, this initiative faces certain challenges and gaps leaving behind rooms for further improvement.

Keywords: SDG, localisation, North-Eastern Region (NER), NITI Aayog

I. Introduction

Sustainable development has been the talk of the town for the last many decades. It has practically succeeded the traditional development jargon since the advent of this millennium. The member countries of the United Nations including India have already adopted the 17 Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) to be met by the year 2030. These goals revolve around the shared dream of a prosperous, peaceful and sustainable planet Earth during the time of current and future generations of people. As the 2nd most populous country and one of the fastest growing economies among the countries of the world, India gets to play a crucial role in the realisation of the SDGs in the international arena. Efforts have been undertaken by the NITI Aayog under the Government of India to keep track of the progress of these goals by means of the SDG India Index. Localisation of SDGs constitutes a part of these institutional efforts. It refers to "the process of recognising and addressing subnational contexts and issues in the achievement of the 2030 Agenda, from the setting of goals and targets, to determining the means of implementation and using indicators to measure and monitor progress" (NITI Aayog, 2021a, p.13). The end product of the SDG localisation is perhaps the progress report of the SDGs at subnational and local contexts i.e. states/UTs and districts in India. Three annual reports (2018-19, 2019-20, 2020-21) of the SDG India Index at national and state/UT level have been released so far. In addition to this, the NITI Aayog in collaboration with the Ministry of Development of North-Eastern Region (MoDoNER) under the Government of India has brought about the NER District SDG Index report (2021-22) as a first-of-its-kind initiative to assess the performance and achievements of the goals and targets exclusively for the 120 districts in the North-Eastern Region (NER)¹. This is indeed a novel and herculean exercise considering 84 indicators incorporated in arriving at 50 specific targets each at district levels. There should have been challenges and limitations, which shall be reflected in the outcome report. A critical appraisal is hereby undertaken on the district level assessment of the SDGs in the NER, being a unique case of the localisation of SDGs. The objective of this critical review is to assess the significance and reliability of the localised index, the limitations and loopholes therein and also to understand the perspectives of the Government of India towards the NER in the context of SDG localisation.

II. Process of SDG Localisation

The process of SDG localisation involves adoption, planning, implementation and monitoring of the goals from national to local levels (NITI Aayog, 2019). The call for localisation of SDGs in India is justified by the need for cooperative federalism to promote healthy competition among the states/UTs and districts, the need for locally feasible solutions and the need for enhancement of local administration capacity in the path of sustainable development.

The technical flow of the whole exercise of localisation in the context of the NER can be put as follows:

- Sensitization of stakeholders and conceptualization of index at the NER SDG Conclave 2020 was held. At this stage, SDG-14 (life below water) and SDG-17 (partnerships) were excluded since these goals are not relevant for the NER.
- Based on district level data availability, mapping of district SDG targets and indicators out of National Indicator Framework (NIF) and State Indicator Framework (SIF) have been done. Out of the 120 districts in the NER, 103 districts have been selected for assessment. The remaining 17 districts being newly created are set aside due to lack of data availability.
- 84 indicators covering 50 SDG targetsⁱⁱ are employed to assess performance of 15 goals in the NER. The selection and finalisation of these statistical indicators involve extensive consultation and collaboration among stakeholders viz. UN Sustainable Development Solutions Network, Ministry of Statistics and Programme Implementation (MoSPI), Ministry of Development of NER (MoDoNER), the respective State Governments and their Departments of Economics and Statistics – all under the auspice of the NITI Aayog.
- For each of the selected indicators, normalisation of the observed values for a district is done by converting them into a standard scale of 0 – 100 to ensure comparability, where 0 means lowest performance and 100 implies that the pre-set target has been achieved. Equal weightage is given to each indicator.
- Goal-wise score for each district is computed by estimating the arithmetic mean of the normalised values of all indicators falling under a specific goal.
- Finally, a composite score for each district is calculated by estimating the arithmetic mean of all Goal scores thereby assigning equal weight to each goal. This score denotes the so-called District SDG Index, which assesses the overall performance of a district in its journey towards achieving the SDGs by 2030. According to the index values, the NITI Aayog groups the districts into four categories i.e. Aspirant (score 0-49), Performer (score 50-64), Front Runner (score 65-99) and Achiever (score 100).

III. Key Highlights of SDGs in the NER (2021-22)

The overall performance score of India as a whole is 66 as per the SDG India Index (2020-21). 22 states/UTs have reached the Front runner category whereas the remaining 14 states/UTs are lagging in the Performer category (NITI Aayog, 2021b). As far as the NER states are concerned, Sikkim(71)ⁱⁱⁱ, Mizoram(68) and Tripura(65) are front runners while Manipur(64), Nagaland(61), Meghalaya(60), Arunachal Pradesh(60) and Assam(57) are in the performer category.(NITI Aayog, 2021)

While observing the performance scores at district level, one will see a different story of sustainable development in the NER. Some districts have performed so well that they have fully achieved certain goals while some other districts have performed so poorly on certain goals with near 0 score. In the overall ranking of the composite scores of SDGs combined, the top 5 districts of the region are East Sikkim(75.87), Gomati(75.73) in Tripura, North Tripura(75.73), West Tripura(75.67) and Serchhip(74.87) in Mizoram. 64 districts out of the 103 districts are put in front runner category.

On checking the performance of the districts on the SDGs separately, there are wide variations across the goals. In certain goals like SDG-5 (gender equality), SDG-6 (clean water & sanitation), SDG-7 (affordable & clean energy) and SDG-15 (life on land), most of the districts have performed well ahead of the national level. There is good news of full achievement (i.e. score 100) of certain goals by some districts. For instance, SDG-7 (affordable & clean energy) has been fully achieved by 7 districts of Arunachal Pradesh namely Changlang, Dibang Valley, East Siang, Longding, Namsai, Tirap and West Kameng. SDG-11 (Sustainable Cities & Communities) has been fully achieved by another 7 districts i.e. Chandel (MN), Churachanpur (MN), Senapati (MN), Ukhrul (MN), South West Garo Hills (ML), South West Khasi Hills (ML) and West Khasi Hills (ML). Again, 12 districts (9 from Arunachal Pradesh, 2 from Assam, 1 from Sikkim) have achieved 100 score on SDG-15 (life on land). However, in case of certain goals like SDG-1 (no poverty), SDG-3 (good health & well-being), SDG-4 (quality education) and SDG-13 (climate action), most of the districts of NER are performing relatively poor. For example, as far as SDG-13 (climate action) is concerned, 57 districts in the NER scored below index score 50, which means that they are only halfway from achieving the targets on climate action. These poorly performing districts are mostly in Arunachal Pradesh, Manipur and Sikkim.

IV. Significance of SDG Localisation in the NER

A separate District-level SDG Index for the NER is one-of-a-kind in India's sustainable development story. Such unprecedented exercise cannot be undermined. Tracking the performance of SDG targets at district level in the NER will facilitate a holistic approach for bringing about sustainable development in the region at grassroot level through a bottom-up approach. The uniqueness of this region in terms of geographical isolation, demography, biodiversity and socio-cultural diversity demands an exclusive policy of development in the region. Hence, this exercise of the government is significantly result oriented in the following ways:-

- (a) It highlights the relative performance of the NE states and their districts.
- (b) It identifies the critical gaps and challenges being faced by them so that local administration can involve filling up the gaps.
- (c) It highlights the inter-state and intra-state disparities across the region so that suitable interventions can be undertaken.
- (d) It facilitates the neighbouring states and districts to learn from each other the ways and means to reach the SDGs.
- (e) It promotes healthy collaboration and competition among them so that the goals can be reached sooner.

V. Limitations & Drawbacks

The process of SDG localisation in the NER, despite of its innovative and noble purpose, is not free from certain limitations and loopholes, which in turn affect its reliability. The NITI Aayog (2021, p.28) has in fact acknowledged the comparability and data unavailability issues. Some of these limitations and drawbacks are listed here.

- (a) There is limited comparability between the NER Index and India Index on SDGs because the certain indicators used are different between the two. Some indicators adopted in the NER SDG Index are specific to the region and hence, not applicable to the rest of India.
- (b) Unavailability of relevant data is another major obstacle in the tracking of SDGs at district level. 17 recently created districts (6 in Assam, 7 in Manipur, 3 in Mizoram and 1 in Nagaland) in the region have not been able to furnish the required data. For the remaining districts too, many indicators have no sufficient data available, in which case a "null" value is given.
- (c) One big question arises on how reliably the calculated scores do represent the actual performance level of the SDGs? The representativeness of the NER SDG Index score in the true sense of sustainable development is doubtful because 84 indicators used to calculate this score can explain only 50 Global SDG targets while there were as many as 169 targets laid down under the SDGs in the Agenda 2030^{iv}. All the goals under consideration have this loophole. If the remaining targets are taken into consideration by employing more appropriate indicators, the overall score may perhaps change. In this sense, it is a matter of self-satisfaction to dwell on the current performance level, which is actually relative to the methodology adopted. This issue of inappropriate and inadequate indicators to explain SDGs is also found in the case of SDG India

Index, which is largely a result of appropriate data unavailability and lack of sincerity and scientific rigour (Mishra & Padhi, 2021; Chatterjee, 2022).

- (d) Higher SDG Index score does not necessarily imply that the goals will be met within the stipulated time. In the case of India SDG Index, forecasting shows that some of the scores fail to reach their targets by 2030 (Chatterjee, 2022). Forecasting and prediction are absent in the case of NER SDG Index too but should be necessarily incorporated by virtue of its time bound manner.

VI. India's Perspectives towards NER on Sustainable Development

India's initiative to achieve sustainable development in the NER and to keep track of progress on SDGs at district level in this region is perhaps one prime example of its '*Sabka Saath Sabka Vikas*' development policy. The North-East states are crucial players in India's SDG localisation policy. The rich biodiversity, rare wildlife and unique cultural heritage are viewed by the government of India as conducive environment for bringing about sustainable development in pilot basis. The already existing Ministry of DoNER provides a fast-track mechanism for regional policy formulation and implementation in achieving the SDGs. In its development planning, government of India has been giving a special thrust to NER. For instance, central assistance is provided to the NE states on 90:10 basis through the coordination of the MoDoNER (NITI Aayog, 2021; Singh, 2022).

The NER is one of the less developed regions in India. Lack of development in the region is evident from various indicators employed in computing SDG index discussed above. The region is facing certain challenges of development such as poor infrastructure, unemployment, low resource mobilisation, subsistence farming etc. Also, there are wide inter-state and intra-state disparities in level of development in this region. At the same time, the region has enough potential for sustainable development. The region is endowed with rich biodiversity and natural resources like minerals, hydel power, forests, agro-based products etc. By adopting a holistic approach, the NE states need to strengthen their institutions and capacity in localising the SDGs. It will encourage the states and districts to learn from each other and march ahead into a healthy competition.

India's Look East Policy which was revamped into the Act East Policy in 2014 is a potential driving factor for the government to pursue sustainable development in the NER. The geographical situation of the region with over 5300 kms of international borders shared by each of the 8 states makes it the default strategic gateway into the ASEAN countries. In order to be able to benefit from the strategic as well as economic engagements with the South-East Asian countries, the Government of India considers it necessary to develop the NER as the transit corridor. Hence, the Act East Policy being a long-term international policy of the country, the government adopts a holistic development approach.

The NER happens to fall within the Himalaya and Indo-Burma Biodiversity hotspots. The rich biodiversity of the region contains unique flora and fauna, which are carefully preserved by a fragile ecology. Such rich biodiversity in NER may be viewed as a *boon* for sustainable development. Because many of the SDG targets require restoration of biodiversity richness and ecological balance. Above this, unplanned development has already begun to threaten the regional biodiversity. Rapid loss of forest cover, drying up of wetlands, jhum cultivation induced soil erosion etc. are looming threats which urgently calls for sustainable approach. As a result, a special intervention by the government of India on sustainable development in the NER and tracking of SDG targets at local level are duly justified.

VII. Conclusions

Localisation of SDGs at district level in the NER is indeed a novel and challenging accomplishment of the NITI Aayog and other stakeholders. The inherent issues pointed out above may be meticulously rectified in subsequent editions so that a bottom-up approach involving local stakeholders can be more realistic to bring sustainable development in the region in a balanced manner. In addition to this assessment of the progress of SDGs, it will be more fruitful and eye-opening in terms of policy implications to incorporate the forecast of the goals. With the help of forecasting, achievable or unachievable targets can be predicted so that thrust areas may be identified and policy interventions be undertaken especially at the grassroots level.

ⁱ The popularly so-called North-Eastern Region (NER) comprises of eight states of India viz. Arunachal Pradesh, Assam, Meghalaya, Sikkim, Nagaland, Manipur, Mizoram and Tripura.

ⁱⁱ The original document “Transforming our World: 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development” contains 169 targets under the 17 SDGs (United Nations, 2015).

ⁱⁱⁱ Figures within brackets indicates SDG Index scores.

^{iv} Even if SDG-14 & SDG-17 are not considered in the case of the NER, there remains 140 global SDG targets in total.

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