

A Glass Half Full? Policy Priorities for Social Development in South Asia¹

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Introduction

The aspiration towards sustainable development is grounded in South Asian tradition and thought. Mahatma Gandhi's emphasis on uplifting the village economy as a strategy for sustainable development as well as the dangers of unchecked growth and environmental degradation have formed the bedrock of the sustainability movement in much of South Asia.

However, progress towards these aspirations is still a work in progress and the focus on cogent public action is an imperative today – countries and regional organisations in South Asia need to go beyond brave resolutions and act in the here and now – with regular tracking and reporting on progress and conscious effort to cooperate and collaborate across the region. The luxury of distant observation is not available given the impending timeline of 2030 in the face of global warming. The point therefore is to effect systematic, collaborative and transformative action towards the realization of SDGs.

The essays in this volume have provided an assessment of how action to tackle the SDGs is addressing persistent development challenges in the South Asian sub-region. They indicate that the challenge for the social sectors in South Asia is a combination of the “unfinished tasks of the MDGs”, in conjunction with several additional established objectives to be addressed under the rubric of the sustainable development goals and targets. This article presents a discussion of the principal themes that link this book together and reviews key issues raised by the contributors as a prerequisite for more effective implementation of the SDGs in South Asia. This synthesis is followed by a discussion of possible policy pathways for the SDGs in South Asia.

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Cross-cutting Themes

The aim of this volume is to bring together several conceptual frameworks and strands of analysis in the emergent field of sustainable development research in South Asia. There are several common threads that run through this book which have been coalesced around five key themes:

1. Mainstreaming SDGs into national and subnational policies and plans
2. Resource availability and financing for the SDGs
3. Institutional framework: Implementation and coordination of SDGs
4. Quality data for analysis
5. The role of regional cooperation, partnerships and stakeholder participation in implementing the SDGs

SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT GOALS



Mainstreaming SDGs into national and subnational policies and plans

From the case-studies presented in this book, countries in South Asia have made considerable progress in mainstreaming the SDGs. Bangladesh and to some extent Nepal, Sri Lanka and Pakistan seem to have operationalized the SDGs in a coordinated, systematic and integrated way into national planning processes. This is most deeply illustrated by Bangladesh. In India's case, the nodal planning agency, NITI Aayog, has done a considerable amount of work in mapping, visioning and creating an action agenda which acts as an enabling framework. Given India's federal structure, the formulation of SDG policy at the state level acquires salience and several Indian states have moved expeditiously to formulate SDG 2030 Vision Action Plans. For instance, the state of Maharashtra has integrated its SDG Vision document into its public policy framework via the annual economic survey and budget and is now putting into place a programme to accelerate progress towards SDGs through its Human Development Mission.

The analysis presented in the country studies indicates that SDG action needs to be facilitated by policy changes (macro-level), institutional development (meso-level) and local/community action (micro-level). For this to happen, the goals and targets need to be localized and made amenable for the cycle of planning, budgeting, monitoring and implementation.

Localisation is particularly important in the case of Nepal where the promise of decentralisation, mandated by the new Constitution, has been emphasised in the Nepalese case study. The authors refer to the 'daunting challenge' of setting up integrated planning, budgeting and implementing mechanisms to localise the SDGs at the provincial and local levels. The importance of localising SDGs has also been referred to by other countries such as Bangladesh and Pakistan. This however is easier said than done because one faces the challenge of making the SDG agenda context specific at the subnational level. In other words, it would be imperative to retain the essence and interconnected-ness of the 2030 Agenda so that “business as usual” at the local level does not overpower the transformational vision. In countries such as Nepal (and Bhutan), a new or relatively recent constitutional regime maybe more able to integrate both decentralisation and the SDG Agenda into its way of working.

On the other hand, in countries like India where decentralisation is of an earlier vintage and subnational governance is driven by ongoing party politics, the challenge is to ensure that the technical guidance by national apex agencies is apolitical and objective such that a state with a different political party in power can also take the SDG 2030 agenda forward without seeing it as a political catspaw. In such contexts, the more viable strategy would be to build the SDG agenda from below, linking it with local governance institutions, both rural and urban. A more participatory approach such as people's planning in Kerala and Jan Rapat (People's Report) in Chhattisgarh may be effective vehicles for SDGs to influence planning, budgeting, implementation and monitoring.

It is clear that unlike the MDGs, the SDG agenda has to be country-driven, both in contextualisation for planning and specification for implementation. Hence, it is critical to concretize very specifically what the SDGs and their action imperatives mean in the local context across social, economic and environmental dimensions. SDGs require translation for the national and subnational context. This involves national and sub-national level visioning, planning at a decentralized level, village/ locality level implementation, monitoring and evaluation and finally, a feedback loop into higher levels of governance (national and sub-national). The issue of localisation is not just about localisation of targets but also customisation or choosing different SDGs and targets to be emphasised and bringing those choices down to the local level.

Evidently, therefore, the SDGs need to be adapted to the national and sub-national levels, without diluting their spirit. The central question then becomes, how to strike a balance between prescription and implementation i.e. the normative aspects of the goals on the one hand, and the realistic situation on the ground on the other, which will not automatically adapt itself to the SDGs.

Further, while the SDGs are a new imperative, governments and other development stakeholders are not working in a tabula rasa or a vacuum in a district, state or country. There is pre-existing developmental experience in place and the SDG agenda has to merge or link with ongoing agendas whether it is state level power sector reform, human

development and infrastructure programmes. Therefore, it becomes critical to examine the successes and failures of prior government policies and how the SDG agenda intersects with these agendas of the government.

Resource availability and financing for the SDGs

Since the Third International Conference on Financing for Development (Addis Ababa) in July 2015, world leaders have called for significant sums of money to be invested in priority areas identified in the goals and their targets. The availability and management of financial flows are critical to unlock other resources (human and physical capital) necessary to finance the 2030 agenda. According to UNCTAD the global resource requirement to finance the goals are in the order of \$5-\$7 trillion a year. In developing countries alone, the finance needed to fund investments in infrastructure (roads, ports, railways, water and sanitation), health, education, climate change adaptation and food security are estimated to be approximately \$3.9 trillion a year. Current investments in these areas are at about \$1.4 trillion which means that there is an annual funding shortfall of about \$2.5 trillion over the 2015-2030 period (UNCTAD 2014).

The magnitude of the problem of financing for the SDGs is brought out by commentator after commentator in this book. Given the fact that there are financial challenges to the achievement of SDGs in the ordinary course, a strategy based upon the immediate deployment of universal public provision of essential goods and services would require even deeper thinking about the galvanising of financial resources.

The country case studies in this book provide various estimates of the scale of public resources available to finance the SDGs and estimate the additional resources required to cover the shortfall. The authors of the case-study on Bangladesh go as far as to say that financing presents 'the greatest challenge [the country] will face in terms of the SDGs'. The total additional synchronized cost for all 17 goals in Bangladesh is estimated to be 28.1% of the projected national GDP in FY 2030. In Nepal, the funding requirement is estimated to be up to 50% of the GDP. In India, various estimates have pitched the shortfall at \$ 8.5 trillion (minimalist estimation given the lack of data) over the mandated 15 years (DevAlt 2015).

The SDGs will require a step change in public and private investments needed to catalyze the achievements of the goals. In this regard, the contributors to this volume recognize that there is an urgent need to re-assess the availability and management of resources and to evolve innovative financing strategies in key social sectors.

Institutional framework: Implementation and coordination of SDGs

The contributors point out that while the SDGs set a common standard of achievement for all peoples and all nations, the achievement in South Asia of targets under the SDGs is currently under way with diverse institutional arrangements and disparate levels of capacity to plan, budget, implement and monitor. In order to achieve convergence for SDGs, there has to be a systematic review of the institutions in place in each country that ensures the cycles of planning, implementation, monitoring and review, as well as the lack of incentives/ disincentives within the system to implement the 2030 Agenda.

With respect to the management, coordination and leadership around SDG implementation, Bangladesh appears to have rolled out the SDG response in a synchronised and systemic manner. As indicated in the case studies, Nepal and Pakistan

have also made a significant attempt. Bangladesh, India and Nepal have all involved their Supreme Audit Institutions (SAI) to conduct a performance audit of governmental preparedness to implement the SDGs. This audit assesses the extent to which the government has adapted the SDGs into its national policy, the financial resources identified and secured to implement the SDGs and the mechanisms to monitor, review and report on progress on the goals in each national context. The ability to assess must be matched by the capacity to implement and deliver in a holistic and transformational manner. Analyses of Nepal point out to government capacity as a challenge and poor human capital at local level as a binding constraint. This is confronted directly by Nepal's ongoing process of decentralisation and devolution of funds, functions and functionaries. Sri Lanka has an established constitutional structure and much better human capital but institutional coherence is the major challenge given ethnic cleavages and fractured micro-politics. In both contexts, the deployment of technology in a universally accessible manner holds much promise as a solution to the problem of silos, remote-ness and rent-seeking behaviour in the distribution of welfare benefits.

Quality data for analysis

An important issue that has been raised by our contributors is the lack of quality data, which can hamper timely monitoring and evaluation of programmes, prevent the specific targeting of interventions and hinder policy development. Effective planning, follow-up and review of the SDG agenda requires the collection, processing, analysis and dissemination of an unprecedented amount of data at local, national, regional and global levels and by multiple stakeholders. The paucity of data has been raised as an issue explicitly in the country case studies which draws attention to the lack of gender disaggregated data. An analysis of the challenges articulated by South Asian countries (Sri Lanka, India, Nepal and Bangladesh) in their Voluntary National Reports, shows the lack of quality data to monitor SDG achievements and recommends 'to strengthen domestic capacity in this regard'.

Additionally, while the problems relating to the disaggregation and desegregation of data continue from the MDG period, several new challenges have emerged. The expanded remit of the newly framed goals entails getting information on a range of indicators that have not been collected by the statistical system and its organisations. For example, governments are required to locate data with respect to the indicators such as 'intimate partner violence' and 'better information about reproductive rights for young girls' which is hard to report on. There is also a lack of clarity as to who will report, what the frequency of reporting would be and how the ethics of the person are maintained while reporting the information. The statistical system needs to address these points.

With respect to global reporting, the United Nations has set up the High-Level Political Forum (HLPF) on sustainable development. Under the 2030 Agenda, member states are encouraged to conduct regular national reviews (Voluntary National Review- VNR) of the SDG agendas. These voluntary, state-led reviews are meant to be submitted to the HLPF annually and facilitate sharing of best practices with a view to accelerating the progress on the SDGs. Thus far, not all countries in South Asia have prepared VNRs. Further, while there is an UN-led mechanism at the global level for reviewing national progress, corresponding to the global processes, there need to be mechanisms for review at the national and local levels for countries in South Asia. This requires the modernisation and capacity building of national statistical authorities in order that they are able to generate

statistics in the calculation of SDG indicators. These global and country-level initiatives need to be translated at the local level so that the data becomes a trigger for action.

There is also a need to strengthen data systems as a result of sub-national and local level planning for SDGs. This includes putting in place reporting mechanisms, capacity building at the sub-national and local levels, management of SDG knowledge networks and improved statistical systems to cope with the unprecedented demand for data required to monitor the SDGs. Localizing SDGs also requires investing in capacity to analyze the "big data" that every large or small organization generates but is often unable to capture. The technology exists but is "absent" in the sense that it is not deployed for use. In fact, new forms of technology including the internet of things (IOT), big data, artificial intelligence and social media, presents a unique opportunity to mine data sources in novel ways. It is critical that such data is utilized to assess progress on SDGs.

The role of regional cooperation, partnerships and stakeholder participation in implementing the SDGs



Accelerated social development in South Asia is imperative for the region to get on track to achieve the SDGs. However, divergence in performance between countries is compounded by significant geographical disparities within countries and increasing inequality and wealth concentration. A few authors point out that given the similar initial conditions as well as the shared economic and administrative challenges of the countries in South Asia, it is critical to have a coordinated, strategic vision for the SDGs at the regional level that can complement the national vision.

The optimizers for regional cooperation require examining the SDGs from the point of view of what can be achieved regionally and therefore, which SDGs are impacted. Regional cooperation and integration are important for several reasons including food and energy security and sustainability. While the 2030 Agenda explicitly recognizes the role of regional cooperation for SDG 1.b (regional frameworks for poverty reduction), SDG 2.5 (regional seed banks), SDG 9.1 (regional and cross-border infrastructure), SDG

11.a (regional development planning), and SDG 17 (regional development partnership), regional cooperation would be critical for achieving a number of other goals and targets including SDG 3 (to address cross-border spread of disease), SDG 7 (regional energy security), SDG 8 (regional value chains for job creation and economic growth) and SDG 9 (sustainable industrialization), for SDGs 12, 13, 14, 15 (environment and climate change), and for SDG 16 (for addressing illicit financial flows and cross-border crime, drugs smuggling and terrorism). Enhanced regional cooperation on social sectors can help in the sharing of learnings and best practices as well as build a common pool of capacity development human resources and funds to draw upon as and when needed. Existing intergovernmental mechanism for regional cooperation must be supplemented by knowledge networks, expert rosters, media and working groups that galvanize focused public action.

Partnership and stakeholder participation have been mentioned as a core theme in the case study on Bangladesh. It is here where context and current baseline matter. Bangladesh with its unique combination of civil society activism and government authoritarianism typical of unitary government is able to integrate SDGs with its national plan and budget under the Five Point Framework. In India, with a large and influential private/ public enterprise sector, the Global Compact approach can leverage both financial and policy input resources from outside the government budget and implementation system. Corporate Social Responsibility and new models of social business can have a much greater traction in a rapidly growing multi-trillion-dollar economy. South-South cooperation is much in vogue in India and this can be leveraged to foster greater regional cooperation within South Asia.

The analysis in this book also flags the need for more efficient resource allocation, greater accountability, advocacy at the regional and global level as also more effective partnerships between government, civil society and the private sector, coherence around national policies, grassroots mobilization and participation. Additionally, resource mobilization for SDGs also requires a reassessment of the range of stakeholders that get energized by the SDG agenda. There is a big role for NGOs, philanthropists and businesses via corporate social responsibility. The sustainability of the SDGs should be built in to the mandate of civil society organizations and corporate groups.

Causality

The symbiotic nature of the development goals underlines the need for cross-institutional, cross-sectoral and cross-goal thinking. For instance, the objective of ending poverty in all its forms requires not only steps to bring down income poverty (whether the global poverty line of USD 1.25 per day or national poverty line) to nearly zero but also expanding social protection coverage, financial inclusion and rights over land, water and forests as well as increased resource mobilization globally for anti-poverty programmes.

It is worth emphasizing that there is less than expected correlation between levels of per capita income and degree of development on the one hand and the achievement of the SDGs on the other. There are variations in the 2015 baseline given the uneven progress in South Asia with regard to MDGs – countries like Bangladesh have made huge progress in social sectors during the MDG period, including on gender indicators, whereas other countries like India have made huge leaps in economic growth but still have very large

pockets of poverty and a considerable deficit when it comes to child mortality, reproductive health, levels of learning and violence against women.

There are synergies across goals as well as inherent contradictions. For instance, there is a strong correlation between SDGs and gender in both causal directions indicating interdependency between gender and other SDGs. 'Gender inequalities are multidimensional and intersecting; hence, they impact and are impacted by many of the goals in addition to goal 5.' The inverse relationship between economic growth and environment presents a contradiction to policy makers. Similarly, the link between increasing decent work standards on the one hand and issues relating to informality and costs of social reproduction on the other is often problematic. A holistic policy framework and resorting to public pressure to resolve these contradictions is needed. However, as pointed out in the case study on Pakistan, resorting to popular pressure is not always easy to accomplish, as politicians are reliant on short-termism and looking for quick electoral gains.

Policy Priorities for the SDGs in South Asia



It is clear that if the SDGs have to be binding imperatives till 2030 then we need to build up a more systematic model than is currently the case. In terms of further analytical work, the following steps would require consideration:

- **Strategic assessment of** the context in South Asia: This involves analyzing trends and drivers of possible future scenarios and examining regional interdependencies. This can include examination of possible shocks, risks and opportunities.
- **Prioritization of** issues that need to be addressed with a sustainability lens including identification of populations, demographic cohorts, ethnic groups, and geographical areas that need to be addressed immediately, given the SDG credo of leaving no one behind and reaching the last first. Seven key strategic priorities have been identified that can accelerate a virtuous cycle of spill over so that progress in one goal can precipitate progress in others.
- **Conduct** gap assessment using modelling techniques for achieving specific SDGs, including techniques such as back-casting. Back-casting or reverse projection is a planning method that starts with defining a desirable future and then works backwards to identify policies and programmes that will connect the future to the present. While doing this exercise, also one can examine gaps in the related statistical systems.
- **Specification** of decisions and actions, based on the gap assessments, that are required to be taken by all stakeholders. These could include:
 - Identifying and scaling up the accelerators within regional and country programmes for achievement of SDG targets.
 - Development of an effective communication plan for the SDGs in South Asia to ensure greater participation of communities, local governance institutions, civil society, private and public sector, media and academia for improved implementation and monitoring of the goals.
 - Improving efficiency of public service delivery by increase in productivity and reduction in costs of delivery and better targeting of population groups that are the most marginalised and vulnerable (These population groups could include rural populations, women and children, migrants, people living in remote areas or conflict-affected areas, persons with disabilities, minorities, indigenous people/ “tribals”).
 - Identifying and introducing technological innovations in public service delivery some of which have already been adopted in some areas but would require scaling up across countries.
 - Identifying policy or regulatory constraints affecting service delivery and designing steps for removing/ reducing these.
- **Identification** of collaborative action by institutions, departments, agencies and development partners which are critical for planned interventions. In doing so, to also identify the coordination mechanism to promote and incentivise convergence and its required mind-set and behaviour change.
- **Adoption** of monitorable indicators for each of the goals which should assume the 2015 value as the baseline and the projected value as a target for 2030. This would include realistic projections for the intermediate time points.
- **Enumeration** of steps to be taken by departments and agencies for timely, disaggregated and reliable data availability for the SDG indicators.

- **Provision of** practical incentives to ensure that the data is captured from Enterprise Resource Planning (ERP) based software being developed by various departments for data integrity and consistency and is available on real-time basis.
- **Linkage** of SDG indicators database to Geographic Information System (GIS) and a regional SDG dashboard to suggest a road map to implement the 2030 Agenda.
- **Financing of the SDGs:** Earlier aid flows were directed through the UN, Bretton Woods Institutions and other multilateral development finance institutions, along with bilateral programmes. Today, the “Global South” exemplified in developing countries' partnerships such as BRICS, SCO and other platforms, has acquired greater prominence, financial clout and role in global development dialogue. The new multilateral institutions (such as the new Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank and the BRICS Bank which are capitalised larger than the World Bank Group) have a significant role to play in financing SDGs and providing stability to the world economy as growth strategies are calibrated to account for environmental sustainability and climate change. It will be useful to assess the trends thus far and identify the road ahead for SDG financing, including leveraging these institutions to strengthen domestic resource mobilisation from the private sector.

Conclusion

The Sustainable Development Goals set an inclusive, sustainable and integrated vision for global action over the next 15 years. By balancing economic growth, social justice and environmental conservation alongside peace, human rights and partnerships, the agenda breaks meaningful new ground. The promise of the SDGs is great and the current data indicate the prospects for achievement are substantial. Performance therefore must go beyond the business as usual and each stakeholder must be brought on board to understand the urgency of achieving the goals.

SDGs in South Asia are informed by the unfinished MDG agenda, yet go beyond it in the sense not only of new challenges in social sectors but also the inter-penetration between social development, economic growth, environment and challenges of ensuring justice for all, peace and improved governance, especially for the most disadvantaged social groups and communities. Leaving no one behind necessarily entails reaching the last first. For this to happen, one needs to pinpoint policy measures, institutional capacity development strategies and more effective local service delivery to meet the SDGs- all within a regional cooperation framework. Further work in the series on SDGs in South Asia will therefore focus on the economic development goals and then the environment and climate change related goals. Only then will one complete a 360-degree holistic and convergent overview of sustainable development in South Asia.

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Policy Consultation on India's Soft Power: Challenges and Opportunities



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