Collective Action for Sustainability – From policy to practice

India's sustainability challenges demand urgent, collaborative action across government, business, and society to align with the UN SDGs and ensure a resilient, equitable future.

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Introduction

Sustainability is no longer a choice—it is an imperative for survival and long-term human development. Every decision we make, whether in personal life or within organizations, has consequences for the planet and society. The urgency of this issue is particularly evident in India, where environmental degradation, climate-induced disasters, and unsustainable economic growth models have heightened vulnerabilities. The World Meteorological Organization (2024) reported that Asia is warming nearly twice as fast as the global average. For India, 2024 marked the hottest year since 1901, with 44,000 reported cases of heatstroke and over 450 deaths directly linked to extreme heat. The heatwave peaked at 50.5°C in Rajasthan, while intense rainfall, flash floods, and cloudbursts in the Himalayan region claimed hundreds of lives and disrupted livelihoods across northern states (WMO, 2024).

These stark realities reflect the direct outcomes of unsustainable human activity, driven largely by unchecked economic growth and resource exploitation. This paper examines the underlying causes of unsustainable development in India, the role of the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) as a guiding framework, and

the responsibilities of key stakeholders—governments, businesses, and individuals—in steering balanced and resilient future.

Economic Growth and Its Environmental-Social Trade-Off

The root cause of the present environmental crisis lies in the growth-first economic paradigm. Post-independence, India has prioritized industrialization, urbanization, and infrastructure development as pathways to national progress. While these policies have lifted millions out of poverty and positioned India as one of the world's fastest-growing economies, they have also intensified pressure on natural resources.

Economic expansion translates into higher consumer demand. To meet this demand, industries increase production, which in turn drives greater energy consumption, water usage, deforestation, and emissions. India is the world's third-largest emitter of greenhouse gases, accounting for about 7% of global emissions (IEA, 2023). The rapid pace of urbanization has further led to land-use change, habitat destruction, and a strain on basic urban infrastructure.

Moreover, economic growth often reshapes societal structures. The rise of consumerism, changes in lifestyles, and aspirations for material wealth have created unsustainable consumption patterns (UN, 2025). This combination of production and consumption pressures underscores the urgent need to rethink economic progress—not as a trade-off with environmental and social well-being, but as an integrated vision of sustainable development. Sustainability is not just focussed on environmental factors but equally social factors are significant.

The Sustainable Development Goals: A Global Framework

The United Nations Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), adopted in 2015, provide a global blueprint for balancing economic growth, environmental protection, and social inclusion. With 17 goals and 169 targets, the SDGs envision a holistic approach to development that "leaves no one behind" (UN, 2025).

Global Progress

Despite this framework, progress has been uneven. According to the *Sustainable Development Goals Progress Report 2025*, only 18% of global targets are currently on track. Most goals show stagnation or regression, particularly those related to climate action, biodiversity, and inequality. Globally, only SDG 3 (Good Health and Well-being), SDG 5 (Gender Equality), SDG 7 (Affordable and Clean Energy), and SDG 9 (Industry, Innovation, and Infrastructure) show moderate improvement trends (UN, 2025).

Summary of 17 SDGs are mentioned below

SDG 1 – No Poverty

End poverty in all its forms everywhere by ensuring access to basic needs, social protection, and economic opportunities. It focuses on uplifting the most vulnerable populations.

SDG 2 – Zero Hunger

End hunger, achieve food security, and promote sustainable agriculture. It emphasizes nutrition, resilient farming, and equitable food systems.

SDG 3 – Good Health and Well-being

Ensure healthy lives and promote well-being for all at all ages. It addresses maternal health, disease prevention, and universal healthcare.

SDG 4 – Quality Education

Ensure inclusive, equitable, and quality education and lifelong learning opportunities for all. Education is seen as a foundation for sustainable development.

SDG 5 – Gender Equality

Achieve gender equality and empower all women and girls. It focuses on eliminating discrimination, violence, and ensuring equal opportunities.

SDG 6 – Clean Water and Sanitation

Ensure availability and sustainable management of water and sanitation for all. It stresses clean drinking water, waste treatment, and hygiene access.

SDG 7 – Affordable and Clean Energy

Ensure access to affordable, reliable, sustainable, and modern energy for all. It promotes renewable energy and energy efficiency.

SDG 8 – Decent Work and Economic Growth

Promote sustained, inclusive economic growth, full and productive employment, and decent work for all. It balances growth with labor rights and sustainability.

SDG 9 – Industry, Innovation and Infrastructure

Build resilient infrastructure, promote inclusive industrialization, and foster innovation. It encourages sustainable technologies and digital connectivity.

SDG 10 – Reduced Inequalities

Reduce inequality within and among countries. It emphasizes social, economic, and political inclusion of marginalized groups.

SDG 11 – Sustainable Cities and Communities

Make cities and human settlements inclusive, safe, resilient, and sustainable. It promotes affordable housing, public transport, and green spaces.

SDG 12 – Responsible Consumption and Production

Ensure sustainable consumption and production patterns. It focuses on resource efficiency, waste reduction, and circular economy models.

SDG 13 – Climate Action

Take urgent action to combat climate change and its impacts. It stresses emissions reduction, adaptation, and climate resilience.

SDG 14 – Life Below Water

Conserve and sustainably use oceans, seas, and marine resources. It tackles overfishing, pollution, and marine ecosystem protection.

SDG 15 – Life on Land

Protect, restore, and promote sustainable use of terrestrial ecosystems. It aims to halt deforestation, desertification, and biodiversity loss.

## SDG 16 – Peace, Justice and Strong Institutions

Promote peaceful, just, and inclusive societies. It focuses on reducing violence, ensuring justice, and building accountable institutions.

SDG 17 – Partnerships for the Goals

Strengthen global partnerships for sustainable development. It emphasizes finance, trade, technology, and international cooperation.

The United Nations Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) provide a global framework, yet progress remains uneven. As per the Sustainable Development Goals Progress report 2025 Globally, only 18% of targets are on track.

Overall progress across targets based on 2015–2025 global aggregate data
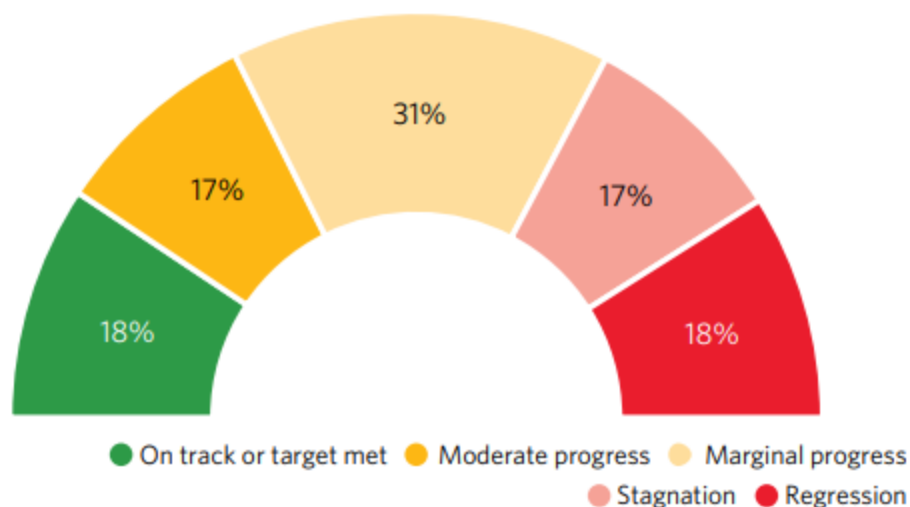
Source: The Sustainable Development Goals Progress Chart 2025

The current global progress is in the image below.

The current progress in India is in the image below

Globally none of the goals are in the trend of on track, only four SDGs namely DG 3 (Good Health and Well-being), SDG 5 (Gender Equality), SDG 7 (Affordable and Clean Energy), and SDG 9 (Industry, Innovation, and Infrastructure) are moderately improving all other SDGs are stagnant except for SDG10 where data was not available.

In the Indian context SDG 1 (No Poverty) and SDG 10 (Reduced Inequalities), are in the trend of on track. This progress may be attributed to the government policy

intervention in ensuring access basic survival needs. Many government schemes which helps people at the bottom of the pyramid has resulted in the trend of on track.

However, progress of SDG 13 has decreasing trend, unfortunately. The primary reason of this trend is the rise in greenhouse gas emissions linked to rapid industrialization, urbanization, and energy consumption patterns. The worsening trajectory of climate indicators underscores the urgency for transformative action to mitigate emissions, adapt to climate risks, and restore ecological balance necessary for human survival.

Key Stakeholders in Driving Sustainability

Achieving the SDGs in India requires coordinated efforts across three critical stakeholders: governments, businesses, and individuals/society.

1. Government: Policy and Infrastructure Enabler

Governments play a foundational role in creating an enabling ecosystem for sustainability. In India, recent policies reflect growing attention to climate change and sustainable practices:

- Carbon and Green Credits: India introduced the Green Credit Programme (2023), incentivizing activities like afforestation, water conservation, and sustainable agriculture (Government of India, 2023).

- Extended Producer Responsibility (EPR): Mandatory for sectors like plastics and electronics, EPR policies ensure producers remain accountable for post-consumer waste (SEBI, 2021).

- Institutional Oversight: The Central Pollution Control Board (CPCB) has strengthened monitoring and compliance frameworks, improving accountability for environmental violations.

- Infrastructure Investment: Initiatives such as the National Electric Mobility Mission Plan, renewable energy expansion, and Smart Cities Mission demonstrate attempts to balance economic growth with ecological preservation (IEA, 2023).

2. Businesses: Innovators of Sustainable Value Chains

Businesses form the backbone of the economy, and their choices significantly shape sustainability outcomes. In recent years, corporate India has increasingly embraced sustainability through Environmental, Social, and Governance (ESG) frameworks and alignment with SDGs.

- Materiality Assessment: Organizations are identifying material issues—such as waste management, energy efficiency, and employee well-being—that directly impact their operations and stakeholders (ITC, 2024).

- Focus on WWE (Waste, Water, and Energy): Many companies have set ambitious targets for zero waste to landfill, renewable energy sourcing, and water neutrality. For example, ITC Limited's sustainability strategy includes achieving 100% solid waste recycling and positive water balance across its facilities (ITC, 2024).

- ESG Reporting and Ratings: With the Securities and Exchange Board of India (SEBI) mandating Business Responsibility and Sustainability Reporting (BRSR) for top listed companies, sustainability reporting has gained traction, enhancing transparency and accountability (SEBI, 2021).

- Circular Economy Practices: HP's Planet Partners program, which recycles plastics—including 2.5 billion PET bottles—into printer cartridges, exemplifies corporate circularity (HP, 2024). Similarly, Tata Steel's initiatives in steel scrap recycling promote resource efficiency (Tata Steel, 2024).

Corporate commitments to sustainability must extend beyond statements and board room discussions, it must be substantiated through transparent reporting, accountable practices, and demonstrable results. This ensures that sustainability initiatives align with national and global policy objectives.

3. Individuals and Society: Custodians of Cultural Sustainability

While policy and business innovations are essential, the role of individuals and cultural practices is equally vital. India's traditions hold rich insights for modern

sustainability. Culture is linked to the attainment of all 17 SDGs, represented by 79% of the SDG targets. Culture additionally explains as much as 26% of the variations in the achievement of SDGs.(Zheng et al., 2021)

- Cultural Values: Concepts like *Aparigraha* (minimalism) and *Ahimsa* (non-violence) promote mindful consumption and respect for ecosystems (Atharva Veda, n.d.).

- Traditional Practices: Repair, reuse, and hand-me-down practices in clothing, community sharing of resources, and rainwater harvesting reflect localized circular economies.

- Ecological Spirituality: Ancient texts, including the *Atharva Veda*, describe Earth as a mother to be revered. Festivals like *Van Mahotsav* and rituals thanking rivers and forests embody ecological gratitude (Atharva Veda, n.d.).

- Rural Wisdom: Composting, natural farming, and integrated water management remain central to many rural communities, offering lessons for urban sustainability (UN, 2025).

These cultural underpinnings must be revived and adapted in contemporary contexts to encourage lifestyles of sufficiency, rather than overconsumption.

 It is the responsibility of every individual to recognize and embrace the rich cultural practices that are inherently rooted in sustainability, and to spread awareness of these traditions. By taking pride in and sharing our heritage, we can contribute to environmental restoration and help foster unity in an increasingly divided society.

Pathways to a Resilient Future

To ensure a sustainable and equitable future, India must pursue integrated strategies:

- Green Economic Transition: Phasing out fossil fuel subsidies, investing in renewable energy, and creating green jobs can decouple growth from emissions (IEA, 2023).

- Strengthened Governance: Robust implementation of environmental regulations, coupled with decentralized governance for local solutions, is essential.

- Technological Innovation: Advances in clean energy, precision agriculture, and waste recycling can accelerate sustainability (HP, 2024).

- Behavioral Shifts: Awareness campaigns, sustainability education, and nudging individuals toward sustainable choices can reshape demand (UN, 2025).

Conclusion

Sustainability in India is at a crossroads. The climate crisis, biodiversity loss, and inequality challenge the very foundations of economic progress. Yet, India also possesses a unique advantage—its rich cultural heritage, policy innovation, and growing corporate commitment. Achieving sustainability requires collective responsibility: governments must enable through robust frameworks, businesses must innovate through sustainable practices, and individuals must revive cultural wisdom in contemporary lifestyles. Only through this synergy can India align itself with the SDGs and secure a resilient future for generations to come.

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